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MESCALINE

1. The Door in the Wall

It was all set, everything coming together perfectly: the reporting trips scheduled, the access nailed down—all the narrative elements of my mescaline story were falling neatly into place. In April I would fly to Laredo and drive out to the Peyote Gardens, the strip of thornscrub running along either side of the Rio Grande, and the only place in the world where the peyote cactus grows wild. A cactusologist (cactologist?—not sure) named Martin Terry had offered to give me a tour, after which we would meet up with a group of Native Americans from several tribes on their annual pilgrimage to gather the inconspicuous little cacti for their ceremonies. In Western culture, peyote is a relatively obscure "psychedelic," but it's a precious sacrament in the Native American Church, the pan-tribal religion that sprang up in the 1880s, at the moment when Indian civilization in North America stood on the verge of annihilation. Native Americans I had interviewed claimed that their peyote ceremonies had done more to heal the wounds of genocide, colonialism, and alcoholism than anything else they had tried. I had arranged an opportunity to see for myself: an invitation to observe and, with luck, take part in a peyote meeting, a meticulously choreographed all-night ceremony typically conducted around a fire in a tepee. And then there was the whole San Pedro angle—San Pedro being the other mescaline-producing cactus, this one from the Andes, where it has been used by Indigenous peoples for centuries before the Spanish conquest. A shaman from Cuzco named Don Victor was coming to Berkeley to lead a ceremony to which I had wangled an invitation. The mescaline piece was starting to write itself. I was excited: this was a story that promised to take me some distance from my accustomed world—not only geographically but culturally, pharmacologically (I had never tried mescaline in any form), even

linguistically, since I was venturing into a realm where Western terms I relied on, like “drug” and “psychedelic,” were considered offensive. I’d heard about a journalist who, speaking to a Huichol shaman, had referred to peyote as a drug. “Aspirin is a drug,” the shaman replied. “Peyote is sacred.”

And then, in mid-March, the pandemic burst upon the world, upending all our plans. Don Victor couldn’t travel. The pilgrimage to Texas was called off and the November ceremony put on hold. Maybe things would be better by November—everyone involved hoped so—but as spring turned into summer and the virus failed to loosen its grip, I began to lose hope that I could travel or do any reporting that wasn’t confined to Zoom. The whole idea of travel, of expanding one’s knowledge—*one’s mind!*—with new sights and experiences, had suddenly become unthinkable. It felt as though one’s mental horizon had suddenly and dramatically been foreshortened, that the possibilities of experience, at least those that depend on movement and human contact, were contracting. For how long, nobody knew.

Not that this was *all* bad; 2020 brought the most beautiful spring anyone could remember, mainly, I suspect, because it was the first spring any of us had slowed down long enough to fully notice. Judith and I were walking the Berkeley Hills every morning and evening, charting, week by week, the unfurling of the floral calendar: March’s magnolias and camellias giving way to April’s wisteria, May’s fragrant jasmine and roses to June’s poppies and daisies. Nature went gloriously on, oblivious to the virus.

But after several borderline blissful weeks of what we began to refer to as “the pause,” a low-grade claustrophobia began to set in. When Fauci* said we could expect another year of this, I was forced to face the fact that “this” was life now, and for as long as we could see. The novel experiences I had put on hold were probably *never* going to happen. The life chapter I was looking forward to writing—the chapter about mescaline and what it had to teach me, about everything from Indigenous culture to the birth of a new religion, from the botany of cacti to the possibilities of human consciousness—was probably going to remain blank, canceled, like so much else, by COVID.

After a few days of feeling unreasonably sorry for myself—for on the scale of 2020's losses, mine were weightless—I decided I should try to think about the problem a little differently. Sure, I could wait for the vaccine, call my editor, and put the story off for a year or year plus. Or I could choose to regard this obstruction that history and life had placed in my way as a spur to think harder or more inventively, as something to be surmounted or circumnavigated or somehow passed through. Somehow.

And then one sun-drenched June afternoon, as spring 2020 made the turn toward the first summer of the pandemic, I found myself rereading *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley's classic account of his first experience with mescaline in 1953. Huxley describes a "principal appetite of the soul" for a means of transcending the limitations of circumstance, the various walls—whether of habit or convention or selfhood—that confine us. For him, it was mescaline that had shown him a "door in the wall."

That's when it dawned on me: maybe mescaline itself might hold an answer, might point the way around, or through, the obstacle I was confronting. If ever there was a story that should be tellable without physically leaving home, surely it was one about a molecule that transported the mind to new places, the kind of places that couldn't be locked down. Mind you, I say this as someone who had never tried mescaline, whether in the form of peyote, San Pedro, or a synthetic crystal in a pill, and I hadn't a clue how to procure some. But this hopeful if possibly crackpot idea had taken root: maybe mescaline was not merely the subject of the story, but also, somehow, the tool that would allow me to tell it without going anywhere. Along, that is, with Zoom.

2. The Orphan Psychedelic

My fascination with mescaline is a fairly recent development. When I first read Huxley, in the 1990s, I hadn't yet tried any of the "classic" psychedelics, so I tended to lump them all together, and read the book as an

account of the sort of experience that any psychedelic could sponsor. In 1954, when *The Doors of Perception* was published, LSD had only recently been introduced (by Sandoz Laboratories in the late 1940s), and it would be another few years before the West learned about psilocybin, with the 1957 publication of Gordon Wasson's account of the "mushrooms that cause strange visions" in *Life* magazine. Though the word "psychedelic" wouldn't be coined until 1956, Huxley's account of his 1953 mescaline journey stood, and stands still, as the canonical "psychedelic trip."

It was only after I had sampled the longer menu of psychedelic molecules—LSD, psilocybin, 5-MeO-DMT, and ayahuasca—that I began to wonder about mescaline, which had become a fairly obscure entrée on that menu, rarely encountered and seldom discussed. Now, rereading Huxley after having had those experiences, I could appreciate how distinct mescaline was from the other psychedelics. Huxley didn't describe leaving the known universe, journeying to a "Beyond" populated by strange characters or decorated with extraordinary visual patterns; indeed, he reported no hallucinations. He didn't travel inward to plumb the depths of his psyche or to recover suppressed memories. Nor did his ego dissolve, allowing him to merge with the universe or god or nature. He didn't report the (classic) psychedelic epiphany that love is the most important thing in the universe.

No, Huxley remained very much on this earth, sitting in his Los Angeles garden, observing the familiar physical world—but through completely new eyes:

> "This is how one ought to see," I kept saying as I looked down at my trousers or glanced at the jeweled books in the shelves, at the legs of my infinitely more than Van-Goghian chair. "This is how one ought to see, how things really are."

Huxley suffered from poor eyesight, but not on this particular afternoon. Now the material world revealed itself to him in all its beauty, detail,

profundity, and “Suchness”—as it *really* was, whatever that means. (I wonder: does the novelty and power of this sort of radical noticing impress women as much as men? I tend to doubt it.) Huxley spent hours (and pages) dilating on the “is-ness” of a chair, a bouquet of flowers, and the folds of his gray flannel trousers, entranced by “the miraculous fact of sheer existence.” These objects weren’t getting up and dancing, or transforming themselves into the god Shiva, or talking to him—they were just *being*, and what an astonishment that was!

“How things really are.” The question arises: why don’t we see this way all the time? Huxley suggests ordinary consciousness evolved to keep this information from us for a good reason: to prevent us from being continuously astonished, so that we might get up from our chair now and again and go about the business of living. Huxley recognized the danger of being constantly thunderstruck by reality: “For if one always saw like this, one would never want to do anything else.”

That’s why our usual perception of the world is “limited to what is biologically or socially useful”; our brains evolved to admit to our awareness only the “measly trickle” of information required for our survival and no more. Yet there is much more to reality, and 400 milligrams of mescaline sulfate was what it took to throw open what Huxley calls “the reducing valve” of consciousness—aka the doors of perception.

Reading Huxley’s account while quarantined in a pandemic intensified my desire to try mescaline. The idea that a molecule could somehow deepen or expand the scope of one’s reality suggested a mental strategy nicely tailored to the situation. I was reminded of the lovely line Shakespeare gave Hamlet, enduring a different kind of claustrophobia: “I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space.” Mescaline might offer a way to do that, not as a means of escape from circumstance, but as an expansion of it. Instead of an alternate reality, it promised infinitely more of this one.

Huxley experimented with mescaline because he wished to learn something about his mind and its relation to reality. No doubt what he learned was influenced by his mind's own predilections and prior concepts, as much as he claimed he wished to escape them by accessing something nearer to "direct perception" of reality. (If there is a villain in *The Doors of Perception*, it is the constraining power of words and concepts—ironic, perhaps, for a writer, or perhaps not, since writers are acutely aware of the limitations and betrayals of their principal tool.) His specific concerns and motivations—as a Western intellectual and writer, as an Englishman living in Los Angeles, as a "poor visualizer"—all play a role in shaping his experience on mescaline. Huxley may talk about "direct perception," but the man can't look at a chair without thinking about Van Gogh, or at the creases in his trousers without thinking about folded cloth in a Botticelli. Though Huxley does at times make reference to art and thought from the East, the set and setting of his experience could hardly be more Western, or more white.

Yet the molecular hero of Huxley's book came to the West from the Native peoples, and native flora, of North America—call it a gift or, as some might now, a theft. Although it was a German chemist who, in 1897, first isolated the psychoactive molecule in *Lophophora williamsii*, the peyote cactus, and in 1919 an Austrian chemist who first synthesized mescaline, the cactus itself has been used by the Indigenous peoples of North America for at least six thousand years, making it the oldest-known psychedelic, as well as the first to be studied by Science and ingested by curious Westerners.

Some of those curious Westerners were acutely aware of, and specifically attracted to, the Otherness mescaline represented to them. Antonin Artaud, the French author and dramatist (1896–1948), was drawn to mescaline precisely because it "was not made for Whites." He encountered Tarahumara in Mexico, who tried to prevent him from using it because it might offend the spirits. "A white, for these Red men, is one whom the spirits have abandoned." For cosmopolitan Westerners like

Artaud, mescaline held the power to re-enchant a world from which the gods had departed.

Though the same chemistry is in play, the uses and meanings of synthetic mescaline for Westerners and the peyote cactus for Indigenous peoples could scarcely be more different. The importance of Timothy Leary's notion of set and setting as shapers of the psychedelic experience surely applies at the level of cultures as well as individuals. The use of the word "chemistry" in the sentence above betrays my own orientation. Yet my hope in exploring the two worlds of mescaline—Western and Indigenous—was to at least try to understand, if not bridge, the gulf that separates them. Did Huxley's account of mescaline (or mine, assuming I got to write one) in any way map the Native American experience of peyote? Did the phenomenology he describes—the almost devotional absorption in the given world—in any way rhyme with the Indigenous understanding of nature not merely as a symbol of spirit but as immanent—a manifestation of it? I was struck by the timing of their embrace of peyote, just when their world was being radically circumscribed—to the tightly bounded dimensions, you might say, of a nutshell. It was in the 1880s, soon after the Plains Indians, kings of infinite space, had lost their freedom to roam the West, and been confined to reservations, that they turned to peyote in order to achieve or recover . . . what exactly?

A more immediate and prosaic question I needed to answer first was: what happened to mescaline in the West after Huxley told everyone how amazing it was? It seemed to have disappeared. At the same time that the use of peyote among Native Americans is growing rapidly (to the point where shortages of the cactus have become an urgent concern), mescaline has become virtually impossible to find. And now, in the midst of a renaissance of scientific research into psychedelics, I hadn't heard of a single research project in the U.S. involving this particular psychedelic.*

I wondered if it was because LSD and psilocybin are simply better drugs, but when I began asking around in the "psychedelic community,"

invariably I heard precisely the opposite. Everybody loved mescaline! A thirtysomething psychonaut of wide experience told me that when he had finally gotten ahold of some synthetic mescaline recently, he could hardly believe what he'd been missing.

"Why have you been keeping this from us?!" he wondered, referring to his psychedelic elders. "All this time, the hippies were hiding the best drug!" He spoke of the "warmth," "gentleness," and "lucidity" of mescaline, qualities he compared favorably to the hard-edged "jangliness" of LSD and the more-than-occasional terrors of ayahuasca.

One of those psychedelic elders is a woman in her sixties I spoke to by Zoom. Evelyn, as I'll call her, has been leading a mescaline circle—an all-night ceremony very loosely based on Indigenous peyote rituals—in Northern California since the 1980s. She feels there is something about this particular medicine ("Please let's not call it a drug") that lends itself to the social experience of a ceremony, as well as to the playing and singing of music. (In her ceremony participants sing show tunes.)

"People can stay attuned to one another on mescaline," Evelyn explained. "It doesn't send you to Alpha Centauri, so you're less likely to become an embarrassment to the psyche." Evelyn's description of her ceremony made me realize that the crisp line I was drawing between Western and Indigenous uses of mescaline might blur in places, and that sticky questions of cultural appropriation loomed ahead.

Another psychedelic elder, a rabbi I know with a long-standing interest in psychedelic therapy, was definitive: "Mescaline is the king of the materials." He reminded me that Alexander "Sasha" Shulgin, the legendary psychedelic chemist, shared this assessment. Shulgin, who had worked as a chemist at Dupont before he discovered his vocation in the course of a mescaline trip in the late fifties, synthesized hundreds of new psychedelic compounds, working in his backyard laboratory in Lafayette, California. Many of them involved tweaking the chemical structure of mescaline, which he declared his favorite. (The DEA so respected Shulgin's expertise that they turned to him whenever they seized a drug they couldn't identify;

in exchange, they granted Shulgin a DEA license allowing him to work with Schedule I compounds.)

Shulgin's transformative trip took place just a few years after Huxley's: "A day that will remain blazingly vivid in my memory, and one which unquestionably confirmed the entire direction of my life." He describes being able to perceive hundreds of nuances of color that he had never seen before. "More than anything else," he wrote years later, "the world amazed me, in that I saw it as I had when I was a child.

"The most compelling insight of that day was that this awesome recall had been brought about by a fraction of a gram of a white solid, but that in no way whatsoever could it be argued that these memories had been contained within the white solid." Rather, they came from the psyche, he realized, which, whether we realize it or not, contains an "entire universe," and there "are chemicals that can catalyze its availability."*

I asked the rabbi why he thought "the king of materials" had become so scarce. "The thought might arise," he suggested, referring to someone in the midst of a mescaline experience, "*When is this going to end?*" A mescaline trip can last fourteen hours. "It's a commitment," he said. This probably explains its absence from scientific research—psilocybin, the psychedelic typically used in experiments and drug trials, lasts less than half as long, allowing everyone involved to get home in time for dinner. Another strike against mescaline is that a dose requires up to half a gram of the chemical; compare that to LSD, doses of which are measured in micrograms—millionths of a gram. In the illicit drug trade, more material means more risk. Which probably explains why LSD, virtually weightless and easy to hide, came to eclipse mescaline, rendering it, by the mid-1960s, an orphan psychedelic.

As for plant sources of mescaline, most of the peyote gathered in Texas ends up in the hands of Native Americans, who have enjoyed the legal right to consume it since President Clinton signed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments in 1994. I was told it is virtually impossible to come by peyote today if you are not a tribal member. It is also a federal crime for a non-Native person to possess it, grow it, transport it, buy it, sell

it, or ingest it. Which, according to many Native Americans, is exactly as it should be. Given the importance of peyote to Native Americans today, and the shortages of the cactus, surely they have a point.

Then there is the San Pedro cactus, which also produces mescaline, albeit at lower concentrations. No, I had never heard of it, either. But it turns out that San Pedro, which is native to the Andes, has become commonplace in California, where it is planted as an ornamental and, unlike the peyote cactus, is perfectly legal to grow. Oddly, however, few Americans or Europeans beyond a tiny community of aficionados seem to know about San Pedro. One of these aficionados told me it grows all over Berkeley, you just need to know what to look for. Could it be that the object of my desire was hidden in plain sight?

3. In Which We Meet the Cacti

So it was: as it happens, not only does San Pedro grow all over Berkeley, but a specimen of the cactus has been happily growing in my own garden for several years now, without the gardener quite knowing it. That's because the person who gave me a cutting of it several years ago didn't call it San Pedro. He called it by its Quechua name, Wachuma.

The son of old friends, Willee had traveled to Peru during a gap year and tumbled into the world of shamanism and plant medicine. He had planted a half dozen or so Wachuma in his parents' backyard, and when we were there for dinner several years ago, he gave me a cutting to take home. Willee explained that Wachuma is a sacred medicine plant in Peru, but at the time I failed to make the connection to mescaline. (Scientists had long failed to make that connection, too: it wasn't until 1960 that mescaline was identified as the psychoactive alkaloid in Wachuma.) I'm always happy to introduce another psychoactive plant to my garden, so was pleased to have it. He also informed me that my cactus was descended from a plant

originally propagated from cuttings taken from Sasha Shulgin's garden. My new cactus had a distinguished pedigree.

San Pedro, I learned later, is the Christian name for the Wachuma cactus, named for the saint who held the keys to the gates of heaven. The name at once hinted at the power of the plant and served to mollify the Spanish, who as Catholics had a problem with the idea of an alternative sacrament, and a plant sacrament at that. (The Native American Church made a similar move a few centuries later, when it adopted several Christian elements, such as calling itself a Church, lest the new religion seem too overtly pagan.)

I planted the two-inch cutting in a pot of cactus mix, kept it moist for a few weeks until it rooted, and then, quickly for a cactus, it began to send up a trio of elegant columns of differing heights—a candelabra. The skin was a smooth matte green with a slight bluish tint. The columns (or "candles," as the cactologists say) are divided into six vertical ribs, each punctuated every few inches by an areole from which jut exactly five short, sharp spines. The vertical ribs come together at the top of each column to form a six-pointed star. It's a handsome cactus, stately and architectural, a bit like the model for a Gaudí-esque skyscraper.

I've taken a much more active interest in my cactus since learning it is busy transforming sunlight into mescaline right in my front yard. But how to get from this to that, from the plant to an ingestible psychoactive compound, I had no clue; nor did I know if my cactus was anywhere near ready to harvest.

I reached out to Keeper Trout, one of the world's foremost experts on San Pedro. Alas, it turns out that isn't saying much, by which I intend no offense: Keeper Trout would probably be the first to agree. *No one* knows much of anything about the taxonomy or botany of San Pedro, a common name that might or might not refer to four entirely different species of columnar cacti native to the Andes: *Trichocereus pachanoi* (which is generally accepted as San Pedro) as well as, possibly, and more controversially, *T. bridgesii*, *T. macrogonus*, and *T. peruvianus*, aka the

Peruvian Torch. And then there are the countless crosses of these species, hybrids that further muddy the taxonomic waters.

Keeper Trout is the author of *Trout's Notes on San Pedro & Related Trichocereus Species*, a suitably modest title for a book whose introduction offers this warning: "We recognize the work in your hands has no authoritative merit." And this:

> We would also suggest that should our readers encounter anyone who considers themselves an expert on this genus, or anyone who insists they know what differentiates, say, a short-spined *peruvianus* from a long-spined *pachanoi*, their best course of action is probably to nod one's head, indicating a lack of desire to argue, & leave them to their beliefs.

After spending a frustrating hour or two with Trout's book, paging through hundreds of black-and-white photos of very similar columnar cacti found in places as diverse as the Bolivian highlands, gardens in Berkeley, and the nursery department of a Target, I had the opportunity to "meet" Keeper Trout via Zoom. A slender, slightly scraggly-looking man in his sixties, Keeper spoke to me from a rustic cabin in the woods outside Mendocino. He could not have been more generous with his knowledge and enthusiasm for the whole *Trichocereus* genus. But though I've gone down some deep, dark Linnaean rabbit holes with botanists in the past, I have never ended an interview quite as confused as I was when Keeper Trout logged off my screen. My notes are an anarchy of disputatious taxonomy I see no need to inflict on the reader. But there were a few intelligible nuggets that shed some light, faint though it may be, on the mysteries of San Pedro.

The most intriguing fact Keeper Trout shared is that sometime after scientists determined that several species of *Trichocereus* contained appreciable amounts of mescaline, a notorious and wealthy cactus collector known only as DZ sought to buy up every known specimen of the plant in North America. Why?

“To prevent other people from having them,” Trout said. The drug war was raging, and psychoactive plants such as peyote were among its targets. Trout believes that DZ wanted to prevent San Pedro from being “scheduled”—added to the official list of plants it is illegal to possess and cultivate. He figured that if America’s youth ever learned how easy it is to grow San Pedro and extract mescaline from it, the government would crack down on the cacti and collectors would lose their access to *Trichocereus*.

“When I first got into this in the late seventies and early eighties,” Trout recalled, “it was almost impossible to find *peruvianus* or *macrogonus*”—because DZ had cornered the market. Did the strategy work? Well, to this day San Pedro has not been scheduled; anyone can grow this mescaline-producing plant without breaking the law.

Eventually, DZ lost interest in cacti; Trout heard he had moved on to collecting cowboy hats. DZ dumped his collection, flooding the market, and eventually the American landscape, with all manner of *Trichocereus*. In the years since, a perfect storm of inaccurate labeling, shoddy taxonomy on the part of so-called experts (don’t get Trout started), and rampant hybridization have contributed to the confusion now surrounding what is and is not “San Pedro.” Yet that confusion is not without its benefits: if the government wanted to stamp out San Pedro, it would first have to specify the names of the species to be criminalized (as it had done with *Papaver somniferum*). As a collector, however, I had hoped to pin down what species I had in my garden.

“Don’t take the names seriously,” Trout told me, sensing my mounting frustration. “The plants don’t care what we call them.”

After our Zoom session, I emailed Trout a snapshot of my cactus. He wasn’t especially impressed. “It looks like the hybrid you find all over the Bay Area, probably a cross of *pachanoi* and *peruvianus*. That strain is far weaker than what shamans in Peru use, but it is what most people in the USA have known and successfully worked with.” He also had his doubts about its pedigree; Shulgin, whom Trout knew, had a serious collection and probably wouldn’t have bothered planting such a common hybrid.

That night Trout emailed me a recipe for preparing San Pedro. It called for a chunk of San Pedro the length and girth of one's forearm for each person planning to drink. Since only one of my candles had attained those dimensions, I decided to hold off on cooking my cactus until it had developed two hefty-enough forearms.

At this moment—that is, the moment before I harvested my San Pedro and began to cook it—my garden and I were completely in the legal clear. The act of slicing off a forearm would probably not by itself cross the line: the gardener might be taking a cutting to propagate a new cactus. But the act of cooking the cactus would change everything: as soon as I chunked up the flesh beneath the emerald skin and simmered it in water, I would be guilty of the federal crime of manufacturing a Schedule I substance. Until then, however, there was nothing to worry about.

There's something agreeable about the fact that I can make a psychedelic here in my garden without exchanging money or worrying about a visit from the police. And while extracting mescaline from that plant is technically illegal, the procedure is remarkably simple and straightforward, involving nothing more than the simmering, reduction, and filtering of a kind of cactus stock. From start to finish, the process can be accomplished without buying a thing (assuming someone gives you a cactus cutting) or having any contact whatsoever with the black market—or, now, even having to put on a mask. San Pedro: the perfect psychedelic for people in lockdown, stay-at-homes, survivalists, and skinflints.

Yet during this period my garden was not entirely innocent of scheduled plants. That's because, purely in the interest of research, I also acquired a specimen of peyote. Until recently, this diminutive cactus grew, more slowly and seemingly less happily, in a pot right next to my soaring San Pedro.

This plant, too, was a gift, from a woman I met a couple of weeks before lockdown, while visiting a commune a few miles south of Mendocino called Salmon Creek Farm. The commune had, like so many

others in Northern California, fallen apart decades ago, but an artist friend of ours had recently bought the place and restored it, and Judith and I were visiting for the weekend—one of the last weekends, as it turned out, anybody went anywhere or met strangers without worrying about the virus.

A handful of the original communards still lived in the area, and on Saturday afternoon they joined us for lunch in the garden, in something of an impromptu reunion. I met a woman I'll call Aurora who had raised two kids on the commune, or had tried to—she decided it wasn't a safe place for children, and moved to a house nearby. Aurora was a gardener and a bread baker, giving us much to talk about, and within minutes of meeting her I had offers of a jar of her circa-1970s sourdough starter and, incredibly, a baby peyote plant.

Peyote had once played an important part in the life of the commune. By 1970 the Haight-Ashbury scene had curdled and the counterculture took a sharp rural turn; in Northern California especially, the commune movement was thriving. A keen interest in Native Americans and their culture blossomed around the same time, especially among the back-to-the-landers. Here were people who actually knew how to live off the land, who were in possession of the kind of knowledge of, and respect for, nature that white kids awkwardly learning their way could only envy and try to emulate. Meanwhile the larger culture was having a reckoning with the legacy of its shameful mistreatment of American Indians, much as it is having a reckoning around racism today. Dee Brown's landmark book, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, published in 1970, told a conscience-shocking story of dispossession, cultural annihilation, land theft, ripped-up treaties, massacres, and an endless string of lies and promises broken by white America. (As Hampton Sides pointed out in his foreword to a recent edition, the book appeared at the height of the Vietnam War, not long after the revelations of the massacre at My Lai. "Here was a book filled with a hundred My Lais.")*

The counterculture embraced Native Americans*—or at least its idea of them. Indians had much to teach the communards, not only about the natural world but about living together in small tribes, and about reorienting

their spirituality around the natural world. So it should probably come as no surprise that a number of communes borrowed Native American religious ceremonies involving peyote. The communards were already familiar with the power of psychedelics, LSD especially. But LSD was a synthetic chemical—like DDT, Agent Orange, and tear gas. By contrast, peyote represented a more organic, authentic, ancient, and New World alternative, and one with an Indigenous pedigree. And at the time, it was still possible to obtain peyote buttons that intrepid hippies gathered in the Texas desert.

In 1975, in a tepee erected at Table Mountain, a neighboring commune, Aurora took part in her first peyote ceremony. The ceremony was supposedly based on the strict rules of the Native American Church. ("None of us knew about 'cultural appropriation' at the time," Aurora reminded me, slightly embarrassed at the thought.) Soon after, Salmon Creek Farm began holding its own peyote ceremonies, typically on the solstice and the equinox.

"The main attraction for us was that we felt we were here to honor the land we were living on and be in harmony with nature, and that was what we thought the Native American ceremony was about."

But then in 1982 or '83, the communards invited some actual Native Americans, up from New Mexico, to participate in their ceremony. "We were so excited! The Native Americans erected the tepee, gathered the firewood, and they had us follow *all* the rules. And we immediately could see that their ceremony was completely different from what we had been doing.

"*Oh, shit, I get it*," Aurora remembers thinking. "What we were doing was *not* okay. We had taken their ritual and turned it into something else." (At least it didn't involve show tunes.) "But this belongs to them. We're never doing this again." The commune continued to hold peyote ceremonies at the solstice and equinox, but gave up on trying to make them "authentic."

In those days, the communards mostly used dried peyote buttons imported from Texas, but at some point Aurora began growing the cactus herself. She soon learned just how poky a plant peyote is, that it can take fifteen years to grow from seed into a harvestable button. She took me to

see her collection, which she kept in a small greenhouse. The peyote cactus hugs the ground like a stone, a roundish blue-green pillow (it reminded me of a pincushion) segmented into lobes arranged in a geometric pattern, each with a little furry white nipple where the spine should be; the flower bud emerges from the center. They're modest, thornless plants, easy to overlook, yet their intricate patterning suggests a mystical object of some power.

Mature peyote plants occasionally make babies—tinier versions of themselves spun off from their edges. Using a trowel, Aurora carefully separated one of these clones from its mother, taking care to keep it attached to its taproot, which resembled a short fat brown carrot. She put the button in a small plastic pot with some potting soil and gave it to me. I brought it home to Berkeley, where, at least in the eyes of the law, it instantly transformed my garden into an "illicit drug lab."

I had a lot of questions about my new peyote cactus—horticultural, botanical, and legal—so I got in touch with Martin Terry, the botanist who had offered to give me a tour of the Texas peyote gardens before the stay-at-home order went into effect. Terry studied at Harvard under Richard Evans Schultes, the legendary ethnobotanist who specialized in the use of psychoactive plants by Indigenous cultures.

Shortly before our interview, my new cactus suffered an injury. Some animal had taken a bite out of one of its five little lobes, leaving a nasty divot in the plant and, right next to it, the missing piece of cactus flesh, evidently discarded. I was fairly sure of the culprit: a scrub jay that had nested in my hedge. I had already caught this bird in the act of systematically yanking pea shoots out of the ground in order to get at their seeds.

I spoke with Terry by Zoom at his home in Alpine, Texas, where he taught for many years in the Biology Department at Sul Ross State University. I told him what had happened to my cactus. He guessed that the bird had taken a bite of the cactus and spit it out, because the taste of the mescaline alkaloid is extremely bitter.

“It appears to have a repulsive taste to some species of herbivores,” Terry said. For example, javelinas, the small pig-like mammal native to the border region where peyote grows, exhibit an aversion to its taste. Terry proved this to his own satisfaction by placing the crown of a peyote cactus on a flat rock in a place where footprints indicated heavy javelina traffic. The following morning, he found that “the peyote crown had been picked up, chewed on very slightly at the edge, and spat out again a few inches away. I believe that result to constitute one data point suggesting javelinas do not like the taste of mescaline, which puts mescaline in the category of a chemical defense.” Humans, too, find the taste of peyote repellent, though they can learn to tolerate it.

These days Terry is retired from teaching but keeps busy with his work for a new organization called the Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative (IPCI), where he serves as the staff botanist. IPCI is dedicated to ensuring that the Native American Church continues to have access to peyote by protecting the lands where the cactus grows and, eventually, eliminating the shortage of wild peyote by cultivating it. Though the IPCI was initially funded by a California philanthropist and clinical psychologist named T. Cody Swift, a white man, the organization builds on the work of the Native American Rights Fund and the National Council of Native American Churches, members of which serve on its board and shape its agenda. Recently IPCI bought a tract of 605 acres of peyote land outside Laredo, making it possible for American Indians to pilgrimage to the peyote gardens and harvest the cactus themselves, instead of relying on the “*peyoteros*” licensed by the state of Texas to gather the cactus and sell it to them.

The licensed *peyoteros*, who are not American Indians, work quickly when harvesting the cactus, often yanking it from the ground, root and all, as if pulling carrots. Poachers do the same thing. If harvesters would instead slice off only the green button, leaving the underground stem and root intact, the plant would eventually regenerate, producing new buttons. But that takes some skill and time. Terry says that many *peyoteros* hire high school kids to do the work on a piece basis, and they can’t be bothered to do it right. Nor can poachers working quickly in the dead of night.

But the shortage is the result of increased demand as well as unsustainable harvesting practices. The Church has grown rapidly in recent years, and although the precise number of members is difficult to pin down, it could be as high as 500,000. The number of peyote ceremonies is also on the rise. Unlike most religions, Native American Church services, called meetings, don't happen on a fixed schedule, but rather whenever the local "roadman," or leader, determines there is a reason to meet, and those reasons are many: to heal someone who is sick; to treat someone struggling with alcoholism or another addiction; to help a couple whose marriage is on the rocks; to send a soldier off to war; to resolve a dispute in the community; to mark a graduation or some other rite of passage.

Some think the Church needs to put limits on consumption; others, that non-Native people should be prohibited from using peyote, as they are by law if not custom. "I would prefer to work on increasing supply rather than decreasing consumption," Terry told me. He believes the only realistic solution to the peyote shortage is for the IPCI to begin cultivating the cactus: starting it from seed in the greenhouse and then transplanting it in the wild. In his view this is the best way to ensure there will be enough peyote for everyone who wants it.

There are two obstacles to this strategy. The first is Texas state law, which, though it allows for the harvesting and sale of the cactus to members of the Church by licensed *peyoteros*, explicitly prohibits the cultivation of peyote for any purpose. Terry and his colleagues at the IPCI hope to get around that hurdle by obtaining a DEA license to cultivate peyote, which is expected to happen soon. The second obstacle, which may be more difficult to surmount, is Native American belief: the peyote found growing wild is a gift of the Peyote Spirit, which it embodies; cultivated peyote is something less than that. To grow it also implies you lack faith in the Creator to provide it.

As an ethnobotanist, Terry cares not only about plants but about the ways humans engage with them, so he is sensitive to the power of such beliefs. He thinks Native American objections to cultivated peyote traces to the origin myth of its discovery.

“A woman ventures out into the desert and gets lost,” he began. In some versions, she gets sick and is left behind by her hunting party. “She’s in serious trouble because she’s run out of food and water. Eventually she gives up, and lies down under a bush,” to sleep and, possibly, to die.

“When she wakes up, the first thing she sees is a little peyote plant. ‘Eat me,’ the plant says. She eats, is revived, and immediately understands what peyote is about, how it works to nourish and to heal. She brings it back to her people.” The predicament of the woman, abandoned and on the verge of death, is that of all Native Americans, many of whom believe, with some reason, that this cactus has saved them, whether as individuals or as a culture—but the plant as a gift from nature, rather than the chemical it contains. It probably goes without saying that San Pedro and synthetic mescaline are nonstarters for members of the Native American Church.

Terry and others at the IPCI think the ideological barrier to cultivation can be finessed. Getting the language right is important, he’s found. For instance, members of the Native American Church object to the notion of a “greenhouse”—a manmade indoor structure—but not necessarily to a “nursery,” a place where babies are taken care of before they’re ready to go out into the world on their own. “I’m hopeful we can find a way to do this that allows the peyote to retain its cultural significance as a sacred plant.”

4. The Birth of a New Religion

Peyote has been used by Indigenous peoples of North America for at least six thousand years (and possibly much longer), but its use by American Indians goes back only a century or two. The Native American Church wasn’t officially established until 1918, and the religious use of peyote by American Indians wasn’t documented until the 1880s—suggesting that the modern peyote ceremony is a revival of an ancient practice that had been lost, or suppressed.

Evidence for peyote's great antiquity comes from an archaeological site in southwestern Texas. Here in Shumla Cave No. 5, part of a prehistoric settlement overlooking the Rio Grande not far from where it meets the Pecos, archaeologists found three flat peyote button effigies that mass spectrometry determined to contain mescaline. Radiocarbon dating estimated the effigies had been made nearly six thousand years ago, during the Middle Archaic period. A cluster of spines from a San Pedro cactus (*T. peruvianus*) was found among artifacts in a cave in Peru and determined to be even older, by a few hundred years. These findings suggest that mescaline is the most ancient psychedelic in use. As to how it was used, or for what purpose, little is known. But New World artifacts from subsequent eras and civilizations (including the Chavin and Aztec as well as the Huichol, Tarahumara, and Zacateco) suggest that both San Pedro and peyote were revered as plants with extraordinary powers.

Zip ahead to the Spanish conquest and we find the first written accounts of the ceremonial use of both plants, much to the consternation of the colonial authorities. "This is the plant with which the devil deceived the Indians of Peru in their paganism," wrote the Spanish priest Bernabé Cobo, referring to San Pedro. "Transported by this drink, the Indians dreamed a thousand absurdities and believed them as if they were true."

The sacramental use of these cacti posed a stiff challenge to the Christian missionary's work. Centuries later, the great Comanche chief Quanah Parker—who would become something of a missionary for the Native American Church in its early years—neatly captured the Church's dilemma: "The white man goes into his church house and talks *about* Jesus, but the Indian goes into his tepee and talks *to* Jesus." How could the bread and wine of the eucharist possibly compete with a plant sacrament that allowed the worshipper to make direct contact with the divine?

By sheer dint of ecclesiastical power, was the brutal answer. In 1620 the Mexican Inquisition declared peyote a "heretical perversity . . . opposed to the purity and integrity of our Holy Catholic faith," making it the first drug ever to be outlawed in the Americas—thereby launching the first battle in the war against certain plants that continues to this day. The gravity with

which the authorities treated peyote is plain from its inclusion on the list of questions priests put to penitent Indians to judge the state of their souls:

> Art thou a sooth-sayer? . . .
> Dost thou suck the blood of others?
> Dost thou wander about at night, calling upon demons to help thee?
> Hast thou drunk peyote, or given it to others to drink, in order to discover secrets . . . ?

Between 1620 and 1779, the Inquisition brought ninety cases against users of peyote in forty-five locations in the New World. The records of those cases suggest that *raíz diabólica*, the "diabolic root," was used in one of two ways. In the first, a *curandero*, or shaman, would use peyote for the purpose of healing or divination. According to Mike Jay, the author of *Mescaline: A Global History of the First Psychedelic*, "the clairvoyant power of the peyote trance was used to reveal the location of a missing object, the cause of an illness, the source of a bewitching, prognostication of weather or the outcome of battles." Peyote brought knowledge that could help solve problems. The second use was collective and ceremonial: missionaries reported scenes in which whole villages would sing and dance all night long under the influence of peyote. "To the hostile eyes of priests and missionaries these 'feasts' were no more than drunken orgies," Jay writes. "More sympathetic witnesses would reveal them as ritual practices of astonishing complexity, woven deep into the fabric of the participants' lives."

Perhaps the longest-known continual use of peyote by an Indigenous people is by the Huichol, or Wixáritari, people, who have lived deep in the Sierra Madre of Mexico for thousands of years. The ruggedness of their landscape and their isolation have protected the Huichol (and their peyote ceremonies) not only from the Inquisition but from most attempts at assimilation. But the retreat to the mountains separated them from their traditional peyote lands. So, as they have done for centuries, the Huichols

make a ritual pilgrimage to a sacred site in Wirikuta, to gather peyote for their ceremonies—enough to last till the next pilgrimage.

Their ceremony, which some anthropologists believe has changed little since the time of Cortés, is much more Dionysian in character than the formal peyote ceremony North American Indians would develop in the nineteenth century. The Huichols consume sufficient quantities of the cactus to have visions. During the course of the night they will dance and sing around the fire as well as pray and laugh and weep; compared to a Native American Church meeting, it is an ecstatic affair. At dawn the ritual concludes with an animal sacrifice and a feast—blood is believed to nourish the peyote cactus. This last practice turns out to have some basis in fact: Keeper Trout told me that a good way to boost the mescaline content of peyote or San Pedro is to fertilize the plants with bloodmeal.

The first white man to witness a Native American peyote ceremony was James Mooney, an ethnologist working for the Smithsonian Institution in southwestern Oklahoma in 1890–91. Mooney, who as a child had memorized the names of hundreds of Native tribes, dedicated his career to documenting and preserving Native American cultures before they completely disappeared from the earth—that erasure being the explicit goal of the government for which he worked. At the time, any Native religious practices deemed contrary to Christianity were outlawed in the United States. (Some of these prohibitions on American Indian ceremonies stood until the Carter administration.) Indian boys were being forcibly removed from their families, given haircuts, and sent off to government boarding schools. The avowed purpose of these institutions, in the words of the founder of one of them, the Carlisle Indian School, was to “kill the Indian and save the man.”

Mooney learned to speak Kiowa and won the trust of several of the tribes that had recently been relocated to the Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. This forced move onto reservations was devastating, and disorienting, to people, many of whom had lived itinerant

lives, moving with the seasons and the bison. Suddenly they found themselves dependent on government rations of beef and corn. Some Plains Indians, hunters rather than agriculturists, didn't recognize corn as human food, so they fed it to their horses.

Mooney was particularly interested in documenting Indian religious practices, old and new, and in the course of his years in Oklahoma, he learned of two new religious movements: the Ghost Dance and the peyote religion. Both these movements were pan-tribal and both were spreading rapidly across Indian Territory, but each represented a completely different response to the existential crisis facing Indian culture as a bloody and calamitous nineteenth century drew to a close.

Of the two, it is the peyote religion that has survived and flourished, but its success can't be understood without knowing something about the Ghost Dance, short-lived as it was. Mooney was one of a small handful of white people ever to witness the Ghost Dance and his account is the best we have, at least from a Western perspective. The ritual was inspired by the mystical experience of a Paiute man named Jack Wilson, aka "Wovoka." During a solar eclipse on New Year's Day in 1889, Wovoka had a vision in which God told him he had prepared a new world for the Indians, one from which the white man had been erased. Wovoka was shown a new dance that would help usher in this promised world—a return to a Golden Age before the calamity of the Europeans' arrival.

Wovoka's ecstatic ritual spread swiftly from tribe to tribe, with massive gatherings of Indians donning extravagant costumes and dancing in a vast circle while singing the new "Messiah songs." This would go on for twenty-four hours, with the participants falling into trance, "some in a maniac frenzy," Mooney wrote, "some in spasms, & others stretched out on the ground stiff and unconscious . . . while the dance goes on." Mooney likened the Ghost Dance to a revival meeting, with participants speaking in tongues and falling into a trance state, but few whites could appreciate the resemblance.

The strange new religion suddenly rolling through the Indian Territories terrified the authorities; to them, the Ghost Dance looked less like a revival

meeting than a prelude to insurrection. In a panicky effort to suppress the "messiah craze," the Indian police shot and killed Sitting Bull, the Lakota spiritual leader, in December 1890, and then, after attempting to disarm several hundred Lakota whom they had lured to Wounded Knee Creek, the 7th Cavalry Regiment surrounded them and opened fire, killing more than 250 men, women, and children in one of the bloodiest massacres in American history. The Ghost Dance was no more.

A few years earlier, and in response to the same sustained campaign to uproot and destroy Indian culture, a second pan-tribal religion sprang up in Indian Country and began to spread from one tribe to another. That spread was accelerated by the policy of forcing far-flung tribes onto reservations in Oklahoma, putting them into closer contact with one another, and fostering a greater sense of "Indian identity" in the face of its oppression. Compared to the Ghost Dance, the peyote ceremony was a sedate affair, conducted inside a tepee and featuring "a certain Christian ambience," in the words of historian Omer C. Stewart, that made it much less threatening to the authorities. The meetings "carried a high moral tone such as might characterize a mission service." And since they took place inside, peyote ceremonies could be conducted quietly and out of view of white people.

Quanah Parker played a pivotal role in the Indians' abandonment of the Ghost Dance and embrace of the new peyote religion. The offspring of a Comanche chief and a white woman who had been taken captive as a young child and raised by Indians, Quanah Parker overcame the stigma of his white blood ("Quanah" means "smelly") by proving himself a great warrior. Rather than submit to life on a reservation, Parker chose to battle the government, but after he was ultimately defeated, he deftly navigated the transition from outlaw to prosperous rancher and trusted go-between with the authorities.

Parker had his first experience with peyote in 1884; he claimed the cactus had cured him of a stomach injury sustained after being gored by a bull. A pragmatist skeptical of messianic fantasies bound to end in

disappointment (or worse), Parker saw in the new peyote religion a constructive alternative to the Ghost Dance, a ritual of accommodation to the Indians' new reality rather than one promising escape. (What an irony! —that the more pragmatic and acceptable of the two rituals was the one involving a psychedelic.)

Parker became a roadman, a charismatic leader of peyote ceremonies, and, in time, the Johnny Appleseed of peyotism. He traveled all over Indian Territory, bringing his bag of peyote buttons and leading meetings for the Cheyenne, the Arapaho, the Pawnee, the Osage, and the Ponca, among other tribes. When the federal government sought to crack down on peyote in 1888, threatening to withhold rations from anyone found using it, Parker successfully defended the practice before the authorities, arguing, with some success, that the peyote religion should be regarded as a complement to Protestantism rather than a challenge. It was no accident that he would talk about seeing Jesus under the influence of peyote rather than the Great Spirit.

James Mooney shared Quanah Parker's enthusiasm for the new peyote religion, which might explain why he became the first white man invited to witness a meeting, in 1891. In a series of reports he described a rigidly plotted all-night ceremony conducted around a fire in a tepee. Officiated by a roadman, a drum chief, a fire chief, and a cedarman, the ceremony leaves nothing to chance, not even one's posture: participants must sit upright and cross-legged through the night with their eyes open, staring into the fire. A crescent-shaped altar is mounded out of earth, with a large "grandfather" peyote button placed on top. Ceremonial objects, such as the gourd rattle, water drum, and staff, are always passed to the left, as is the basket of peyote buttons, which comes around several times over the course of the night; in one of the few elements of the ritual that might be called spontaneous, participants can decide for themselves how many buttons to ingest. The roadman offers prayers. Participants take turns singing songs, each one four times; the rhythm of drumming is rapid and unceasing.

At midnight there is a break, allowing participants to stretch their legs. (Few take advantage of the opportunity, Mooney noted, since doing so is

regarded as a sign of weakness.) At this point prayers are said for anyone who is sick. Mooney described a powerful moment when the door flap opened and a man entered the tepee holding an infant “child sick almost to death.” The roadman prayed over the man’s child, after which “he left as silently as he had entered.” Also, at midnight there is a water ritual that Mooney described as a “baptismal ceremony.” Water is then passed around for everyone to drink.

“Each man then calls for as many peyotes as he desires to eat, and the songs are resumed, increasing in weird power as the effect of the drug deepens.” This goes on “until daylight begins to glimmer through the canvas.” As the ceremony drew to a close, the roadman turned to Mooney and told him he “should go back and tell the whites that the Indians had a religion of their own which they love.”

This Mooney did, devoting much of the rest of his career to defending peyotism and helping to establish the Native American Church. He argued to his superiors at the Smithsonian and anyone else who would listen that the new religion promoted religious and moral inspiration as well as sobriety, alcoholism having emerged as a scourge among Indians relocated to reservations. Mooney fervently believed that the new peyote religion offered a means to rescue Native culture and identity from imminent collapse while at the same time helping Indians adjust to the strictures of reservation life. “Rather than awaiting a transformation of the world,” Mike Jay writes, “it gave its worshippers a means to transform themselves from within.”

The government had no interest whatsoever in the survival of Indian identity; to the contrary, its policy was to extinguish it. The new religion might not be as threatening as the Ghost Dance, but Christian missionaries determined to stamp out peyotism, which they regarded as heathen and no different than alcohol. At the missionaries’ behest, Oklahoma passed the first law banning peyote in 1899, though within a decade it had been repealed, largely as a result of Quanah Parker’s lobbying efforts.

Soon after, however, peyote got tangled in the politics of Prohibition; William “Pussyfoot” Johnson, a notorious Prohibitionist who called peyote

“dry whiskey,” took it upon himself to raid peyote meetings in Indian Country. Around the same time, another opponent of peyote, Superintendent Charles Shell of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Agency, decided he should find out for himself what peyote did to the mind. He ate some at home in the company of a doctor and was astonished to find himself having thoughts “along the line of honor, integrity, and brotherly love.

“I seemed incapable of having base thoughts. . . . I do not believe that any person under the influence of this drug could possibly be induced to commit a crime.”

But Shell’s unexpectedly favorable trip report did little to discourage the Prohibitionists, who along with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (operating under the sway of the missionaries) pressed for a federal law banning the cactus. Only the organized efforts of American Indians themselves, as well as the congressional testimony of white advocates such as James Mooney (and, later, Richard Evans Schultes), turned back repeated attempts to crush peyotism.

Hoping to gain the protection of the First Amendment, representatives of several tribes came together in El Reno, Oklahoma, in August 1918 to sign the articles of incorporation of the Native American Church—marking the first time that Indians officially referred to themselves as Native Americans. James Mooney played a critical role in the negotiations leading up to this event. The charter, which made explicit reference to the “peyote sacrament,” stated that the Church had been incorporated “to foster and promote the religious belief of the several tribes of Indians in the State of Oklahoma, in the Christian religion.”

But the battle was far from over. Legal and political skirmishes about the legitimacy of the peyote religion would continue for the rest of the twentieth century, as peyotism, having barely survived Prohibition, now got caught up in the drug war. Beginning in the 1960s, peyote meetings were frequently raided and Indians found in possession of peyote were arrested. Civil liberties organizations like the ACLU took up the American Indians’

cause, and a body of law gradually developed affirming the Native American Church's First Amendment right to the free exercise of religion.

It was in pursuit of precisely this freedom, of course, that the American colonialists originally fled Europe, coming to the Indian lands they rechristened New England. That their descendants would now seek to suppress the Indians' own religious freedom was an irony apparently lost on most Americans, including the justices of the U.S. Supreme Court. In a shocking 1990 decision written by Justice Antonin Scalia, the Native American Church lost its right to practice its religion. Up to that point, the courts had held that the government could not deny one's First Amendment right unless it could demonstrate a "compelling state interest." But in *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith* (Alfred Leo Smith was a member of the Klamath Nation who was fired from his job when he refused to stop attending Native American Church meetings), Scalia threw out the compelling state interest standard. Calling America's religious pluralism "a luxury," he held that the criminal law and the police power must take precedence over the free exercise of religion. (As the attorneys for the Church commented, the decision, in effect, "rewrote the First Amendment to read, 'Congress shall make no laws except criminal laws that prohibit the free exercise of religion.'") The government's interest in prosecuting its war on drugs had won out over the First Amendment's protection of religious liberty.

Scalia's ruling sparked outrage in the larger religious community, which the very next day came together to ask the Court to reconsider its decision. In his opinion, Scalia had advised the Church to turn to the legislature to win back the right the Court had taken away, and within only a few years of Scalia's decision the Church did precisely that. In 1993 Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which restored the compelling state interest standard. This represented progress, yet it didn't guarantee a government wouldn't find some compelling interest to ban the use of peyote, especially during the drug war. Led by the Winnebago tribal leader Reuben A. Snake Jr., the Native American Church assembled a coalition and launched a campaign to press Congress to specifically protect the

Church's freedom to use its peyote sacrament. On October 6, 1994, President Clinton signed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments. Henceforth, "the use, possession, or transportation of peyote by an Indian for bona fide traditional ceremonial purposes in connection with the practice of a traditional Indian religion is lawful, and shall not be prohibited by the United States, or any State." A century after the new peyote religion had sprung up on the Great Plains, the Native American Church had secured the legal right to use its sacrament.

5. Peeking Inside the Tepee

It's not easy for an outsider to learn exactly what the peyote ceremony means to Native Americans today, or what it has given them. Clearly a great many of them regard it as precious, even indispensable. Members of the Native American Church I spoke to credit peyotism with revitalizing and sustaining traditional Indian culture; promoting sobriety; healing diseases of both the body and mind; and creating bonds among Indian tribes who have often found themselves at odds.

But how, exactly? How does this ceremony and its psychoactive sacrament effect all this . . . personal and collective transformation? I had hoped to find out for myself by attending a Native American Church meeting in Texas in November, but that, alas, was not to be. That left Zoom. After interviewing a number of roadmen, Church officials, and members from several different tribes, I have a better sense of what takes place in the tepee, but I'm still not entirely sure I understand it. Part of that uncertainty owes to the epistemological gulf between Indigenous and Western ways of thinking about plants and medicine and "drugs." But I also encountered a deep reluctance on the part of many Natives to share—at least with this white person—exactly what goes on behind the tepee canvas.*

The reticence to discuss spiritual matters with a white writer from Berkeley should not have surprised me. Steven Benally, a Navajo roadman

in his seventies who currently serves as president of the Azeé Bee Nahaghá of Diné Nation (formerly known as the Native American Church of Navajo Land), regarded me with open distrust when I asked him what I thought was a straightforward question: What had peyotism done for his people? I had reached him at his home in Sweetwater, Arizona, on the reservation, which had been hit particularly hard by the pandemic; when we spoke in May, eight people of his acquaintance had already died. Benally's affect was calm, dignified, and deliberate, but at times he flashed a fierceness that caught me off guard.

"I'm guessing you're white, yes?" Benally began. "All this information you want, what's in it for me? It's a dilemma I have, talking to you. If I divulge too much information about how peyote is good for this particular thing, about how it works, and give some testimonial of how this peyote heals, you might write something that creates curiosity about it among these psychedelic people." He knew I had written a book about psychedelic science, two words he had no use for.

"I'm very aware of our history, and what colonization has done to us, and the doctrine of 'discovery.'" The implication was clear: much had been taken from Indigenous peoples under the banner of "discovery" and, from his perspective, I was another in a long line of white discoverers from whom nothing good could come.

"We have been given this plant for our own needs. We must protect it for the sake of our children and grandchildren, for a future time when they're going to need it to help them survive. [Benally is a founding member of the Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative.] To show and tell the world how it works and what it is good for is something I'm kind of scared to do. Do you see what I mean? If there's money to be made from peyote, nothing will stand in the way." Native Americans of Benally's generation remember the 1970s fad for peyote inspired by Carlos Castaneda, which drew an untold number of hippies to the peyote gardens of Texas to harvest a sacrament they regarded as a psychedelic drug, putting pressure on the only wild population of peyote in America. Another concern is that the scientists now researching psychedelics as a treatment

for mental illness will turn their attention to peyote as the source of a new drug.

“We are taught to be really protective of our medicine.”

After a brief surge of indignance, I realized I couldn’t blame him for being so protective of his knowledge and distrustful of me. What *is* in it for him and for Native Americans to share their ceremony, and this plant, with those who have taken so much from them?

Still, I persisted, albeit more delicately, and after a negotiation about what would remain off the record (including some testimonials to miraculous healings credited to peyote), we talked for at least an hour, about everything *except* what takes place in the tepee.

Benally believes the legal status of peyote—with Native American Church members having the right to use the plant while it remains a crime for everyone else—is exactly as it should be: “The law helps us in protecting this little peyote plant.”

But if the plant is such a powerful medicine, why *shouldn’t* others equally in need have the ability to use it, too?

“The great spirit gave us this plant a long time ago. Before the melting pot, other people probably had the kind of connection with nature, with a place and its plants, that we still have. They once had their own healing plants, but they’ve been lost.

“There are a lot of people today who are searching. They’ve lost their connection to the land and to spirituality. They’re not satisfied with Western medicine and science and are looking for that missing link. Now, they are trying to think Indian, or think Indigenous. I understand that. But we don’t want our grandchildren to end up like these people! If we don’t conserve peyote, that’s how they are going to end up, and then they will have to look to other peoples to find their [healing] plant. That is why you do all that you can to hang on to what you have so your kids don’t end up as roamers floating out there.”

Benally never used the term “cultural appropriation,” but it hung in the air between us. The background to his comments was a conflict that had recently erupted between the Native American Church and a new drug-

policy reform movement called Decriminalize Nature. Almost overnight, this movement had persuaded municipal governments in several cities (including Oakland, Santa Cruz, and Ann Arbor) to order local law enforcement to treat the prosecution of crimes involving illicit plant medicines such as ayahuasca, psilocybin, and peyote as the lowest priority. Until the pandemic put everything on hold, the city councils of a half dozen other cities* were prepared to vote on Decrim Nature resolutions.

The movement had single-handedly reframed the politics of drug-policy reform, beginning with the word "drug," which it scrupulously refrains from using, along with "psychedelic," another baggage-laden term. No, these were now "plant medicines," or "entheogens"—a term for psychedelics meant to underscore their spiritual uses. (Entheogen means, roughly, "manifesting the god within.") Decrim Nature has done a brilliant job of naturalizing psychedelics; in effect, reframing them as an age-old pillar of the human relationship with the natural world, a relationship in which the government simply has no legitimate role. There are now more than one hundred local chapters of Decrim Nature around the country.

To those who believe adults should be able to use plant medicines without fear of the police, the early success of the movement seemed like unalloyed good news. But the Native American Church saw things differently. Worried that the decriminalization of peyote would fire demand, drawing fresh hordes of psychonauts to the peyote gardens, the Church requested that Decrim remove peyote from its list of approved plant medicines and images of the cactus from its website.

This put Decrim in an exquisitely awkward spot. Its supporters are precisely the kind of people who deeply respect Indigenous cultures and regard themselves as woke on all questions of race, imperialism, and colonialism. Now they had run afoul of a group—Native Americans!—whose traditions and wisdom they not only revered but sought to emulate in their use of entheogens. Yet to exclude peyote from decriminalization, or limit access to it to one race and not another, would foul the beautiful simplicity of the movement's message that there can be no such thing as a "criminal" plant.

What to do? Hoping to mollify the Native Americans, Decrim agreed to stop talking about peyote specifically and refer instead to "mescaline-containing cacti." (Even though peyote had been specified as one of the plants to "decriminalize" in the texts of the Oakland and Santa Cruz resolutions.) It did not take down images of peyote from its website, however, and published a statement on the site that only further antagonized the Indians:

"It is therefore the position of the DN movement that the divine peyotl cactus does not belong to any one people, nation, tribe or religious institution. We consider it to be Mother Nature's Gift to all of humanity, and we are firmly committed to awakening humankind to the spiritual insights and important messages that peyotl teaches to the human custodians of this planet we all share and live on."

"Decrim is a slap in the face of Indigenous people," I was told by Dawn Davis, another member of the Native American Church. Davis is a *Newe* Shoshone-Bannock and lives on the reservation in the Ross Fork Creek District in Idaho; she is finishing her Ph.D. in natural resources at the University of Idaho. The natural resource she studies is the dwindling wild population of peyote. She worries that peyote could end up on the endangered species list, which could spell disaster* for peyotism and the religion it has spawned. She brought up Decrim during our Zoom call before I'd had a chance to ask her about it.

"Now a person in Oakland has more rights to peyote than I do as a tribal member living on the reservation!" She was referring to the fact that, unlike the citizens of Oakland, Native Americans didn't gain the right to cultivate peyote under the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994; they also must prove their membership in a tribe and the Church in order to use peyote.

"Gaining access to peyote was not an overnight battle, not as simple as going to a city council for a vote. That was four years of hard work, after a century of struggle to secure our right to this plant."

Davis was at her desk at home when we spoke, her young daughter occasionally darting into frame, angling for her attention. She has a round,

open face framed by long black hair parted in the middle. Davis was no more forthcoming about the ceremony than was Steven Benally, but for slightly different reasons.

“There aren’t a whole lot of us interested in talking about our experiences.” She did tell me her parents had brought her to meetings when she was a young child, and they’d begun feeding her small amounts of peyote from the time she was twelve, a common practice. (Dawn was exposed to peyote in utero, when her mother attended her grandmother’s wake while pregnant.)

“People ask what I feel during a NAC ceremony—but to me, these are the most private and intimate of experiences, and even I don’t completely understand them. But it’s up to me to interpret them. I don’t want someone else’s interpretation.

“It’s hard to talk about how important and sacred this medicine is, especially to people who see the plant as a thing. To me, peyote is sentient. The plant is not a thing but a relative, an elder. I have witnessed the healing power of peyote and I want to respect that in every way I can.”

Davis worries that between the rising demand for peyote from Native Americans and the flaws of the current system for supplying it, the time may come when there is not enough of the cactus left for the religion to survive. The problem is that the current system, in which four licensed *peyoteros* harvest peyote and then sell it to members of the Church, is unsustainable. Too often, they work hastily, sometimes damaging the plant so that it can’t regenerate. But there are other threats, too: cattle that trample the thornless cacti; the recent arrival of wind farms on the peyote lands; other types of development; and poaching, which rises along with the popularity of psychedelics. Davis acknowledges that Native Americans themselves bear some responsibility for the shortage.

“Conversations are happening with tribes about reducing consumption. You have individuals who participate in ceremonies every weekend. I call them overeaters. I’m very mindful about how much I eat, because I know how far that medicine has traveled. But many Native Americans have never been to the peyote lands; they’ve become disconnected from their plant.”

This is why the Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative, for whom Davis has consulted, is so vital: it promises to reconnect Native Americans to the peyote lands, creating new opportunities for them to make the pilgrimage and harvest for themselves on the 605 acres the Church now owns.

I asked Davis about the potential of cultivation to ameliorate the shortage. Like most of the Native Americans I talked to about cultivation, she was skeptical that greenhouse-grown peyote would be the same as peyote grown in the wild. “We don’t know how peyote creates its mescaline. In the wild it could be the rabbits, the juniper, the soil, a migratory bird, the rains—it could be all those things that make it what it is. I worry that by taking it out of its home, it’s going to turn into something else.

“I’ve seen videos of Martin Terry’s plants, and they’re living in a greenhouse behind three sets of locks! I look at these poor plants and think, what are they going through?” However, Davis is not averse to the idea of starting cacti in outdoor nurseries and then transplanting them in the wild. “But maintaining the wild populations we have should be the number one priority.”

In this, white people like me have a role to play, Davis believes, which is why she accepts invitations to speak at psychedelic conferences. Her message: “Leave peyote alone. This is not what they want to hear. But I don’t believe this medicine is for everyone, or that it’s all about love and peace. They can synthesize all the mescaline they want, but please leave the wild populations alone.”*

After speaking to Davis and Benally, I realized that calling the use of peyote by non-Native people an instance of cultural appropriation isn’t quite right. To appropriate an expression of culture—a practice or ritual, say—may or may not diminish it; the point can be argued either way. Yet the practice itself does not cease to exist by virtue of having been borrowed or copied. That is not the case with peyote today. Here, the appropriation is taking place in the finite realm of material things—a plant whose numbers are crashing. This puts the eating of peyote by white people in a long line of nonmetaphorical takings from Native Americans. I was beginning to see

that, for someone like me, the act of *not* ingesting peyote may be the more important one.

Not all the Native Americans I spoke to were quite as reluctant to talk about what happens in the tepee, or even as hostile to the idea of inviting a white man to observe the ceremony provided he "comes in the right spirit." Sandor Iron Rope is a fifty-one-year-old Teton Lakota from the Black Hills of South Dakota, president of the Native American Church of South Dakota, and a central figure in the IPCI. He drove into Rapid City for our call; the internet connection on the reservation would not support a Zoom session. A gentle man, Iron Rope was disarmingly open and willing to go places in our conversation that Benally and Davis would not. When I asked him if he could take me into the tepee during a peyote ceremony, he paused, gathered up his thoughts, and gave it a try, with the warning that some of his words and concepts might be lost on me. Here is some of what he said:

> If you want to go into the tepee, you would first have to change your mind-set. In the Indigenous perspective, we are here upon Mother Earth. We feel the wind and the wind talks. The sun comes up in a certain direction and it goes down in a certain direction. And so we build an altar on the ground made from Mother Earth and in the shape of a crescent moon. And we know Grandpa Fire is going to talk to us and commune with us, so we build the fire in a prayerful manner, making offerings along the way. The four elements—the earth, the fire, the water, the air—are going to come into the ceremony at some point in time. And then there is the plant, set upon the altar.
>
> Some people call it the flesh of our ancestors, because that's what it is, you know, and at the same time it's a spirit. Different people have different experiences with the medicine. It talks to you at different levels: about what it is you need to see, what it

is that you need to feel, or experience. The medicine knows you before you even know yourself. It is like a mirror. When people get up and look in the mirror, they can fix themselves, brush their teeth and see if they look okay, you know, presentable for society. But this medicine is a mirror that allows you to see inside yourself, into the core of your heart and spirit. The peyote knows you.

So when you start to think about something, maybe something that needs healing, what you're thinking about, what you're saying, the medicine can hear you. It's not like taking out the DSM, and getting a diagnosis. It's our way of life, talking to things and realizing the life force in all things.

Often in a meeting somebody will say, Why are we gathered? We're gathered here because I need help with this problem. It could be an illness, a divorce, domestic abuse, alcoholism. I want some prayers for this reason. That person will sit in a certain spot.

The tepee represents a family, and a home. The poles that hold it up represent the woman, the foundation of the home. And then the covering represents the male protecting the female, and the fire inside. The fire is grandpop, and the flaps represent grandma, the two of them guiding the family prayer from a long time ago. And those little pegs that hold the tepee down, those are all your children. So when you go into the tepee you are going into that spiritual family for help, for prayers, because we are all related whether we want to be related or not.

People may wander off during their meditation; they will see things and hear things and smell things, but the intercessor will remind people they are there for a purpose and bring everyone back to that purpose. The songs and the prayers and the drumming help focus everyone on the purpose.

The concept of a family praying together—this is what the government suppressed and broke up, when it sent our children

to boarding school, cutting off their hair, which is sacred. To lose their hair was to lose their spiritual identity. So there was a lot of healing that was needed after that, and when alcohol was introduced on our reservations. Alcohol was stealing the spirit of our people. And then came in many other things, many kinds of trauma. But it was a spiritual battle at the beginning [to defend the peyote ceremony] and it is a spiritual battle still.

One day you may sit beside us in a teepee somewhere and you'll realize a little bit about what we're talking about.

Sometimes, sometimes if you respect something, you just have to leave it alone. You know, my dad served in the war and when I was growing up, he had a firearm in his closet. And on his bedside there were these beads, made from seeds, that he used to make craft items. As a little boy I would go in there, put my finger in those beads and move them around. One day when he came home, he said, "Hey, who was in my beads?!" I didn't want to say it was me. And after he caught us a few times, whenever we'd go into his room, we knew we couldn't touch his beads, so we just looked. That's all.

Sometimes the best way to show your respect for something is to just leave it alone.

Sandor Iron Rope's words brought me as close as I had come to a peyote meeting, and they may well be as close to a tepee as I will ever get. And, as Iron Rope had predicted, there was much in his account I couldn't completely understand.

I found some illumination in an academic book: Joseph D. Calabrese's *A Different Medicine: Postcolonial Healing in the Native American Church*, published in 2013. Calabrese is a medical anthropologist and clinical psychologist who spent two years in the Navajo Nation, working as a clinician and observing as an anthropologist for his dissertation. During his time in Arizona he attended several peyote ceremonies, and his

observations helped me make sense of several things Sandor Iron Rope had said. So here, for what it's worth, is one white man's take on peyotism, a look at an Indigenous practice through the prism of Western concepts of psychology and anthropology.

Calabrese found that many Navajos share Sandor Iron Rope's belief that peyote is an omniscient spirit, capable of seeing through people and somehow "knowing" them better than they know themselves; it has the power to bare one's faults and force a person to confront them. Peyote functions in the lives of Church members much like a superego; he suggests that the plant has a gaze. Children are socialized in this belief, taught that "the Peyote Spirit knows his or her activities even in the absence of parents." Conceiving of a plant as an omniscient spirit might seem fanciful, but how different is that, really, from a psychological construct like the superego—an inner voice that recalls us to the moral and ethical strictures of our society?

What I found striking in Calabrese's account is that we have in peyote a "drug" that, instead of undermining social norms, actually reinforces them. "The Native American Church arose as a revitalization movement," he points out, "focused on personal healing, rebuilding community, harmonious family relationships, connection with the Divine, and avoidance of alcohol." Compared to psychedelics in the West in the 1960s, peyote's role in the Native American community is notably conservative. (Yet another reminder of the critical role of set and setting in any psychedelic experience.) The use of peyote in the Native American Church gives us a moral model of drug use.

That such a model exists (and it exists in other traditional cultures as well) requires us to reconsider the whole concept of "drugs" and the moral failings we associate with them. In the West, our understanding of drugs is organized around ideas of hedonism, the wish for escape, and the desire to dull the senses. Early white observers of peyotism often assumed Indians used the drug as a painkiller, Calabrese writes, when in fact "it tends to increase the intensity of sensations rather than deaden them." A psychedelic experience can be hard work, the very opposite of what most people expect

from illicit drugs. Westerners also tend to put medicine and religion in separate boxes, but for Native Americans (as for many traditional cultures), religion is foremost about healing. The conflation of the two has been formally recognized by the Indian Health Service, which now covers the cost of peyote meetings (and sweat lodges) for the treatment of certain illnesses. Hard to imagine, but there is a "client service code" for a religious ceremony with a psychedelic sacrament!

What peyotism chiefly heals is trauma in its various collective and individual manifestations, the enduring legacy of official policies that sought nothing less than "the destruction of Native American cultures." Calabrese reminds us of the historical moment when the new religion began to spread across North America: soon after Indians had been forced onto reservations and the Ghost Dance had been viciously suppressed. "Instead of focusing on a transformation of the world through the disappearance of the Europeans," Calabrese writes, peyotism "focused on personal transformation that would allow one to survive in the post-conquest situation, build a stronger community, and avoid forms of postcolonial disorder like addiction to the White Man's alcohol."

How does the peyote ceremony effect these transformations? Calabrese proposes a psychological explanation that a Native American would no doubt regard as reductive, but which seems plausible to me. Like other psychedelic compounds, the mescaline in peyote induces a state of mental plasticity, one in which you are highly suggestible and therefore open to learning new patterns of thought and behavior. While in this trance state, rigid narratives about yourself ("I can't get through the day without a drink"; "I am worthless"; and so on) tend to soften until it becomes possible to construct new ones, typically narratives of transformation or rebirth. Apart from the group setting, this model closely resembles "psychedelic therapy" as it is being practiced today in the West.

But the group setting here is critical. The fact that the healing process is unfolding within a community, with everyone listening to the same music and prayers, gazing into the same fire, and experiencing the same shifts in brain chemistry, serves to reinforce the individual's new narrative, as does

the fact that the attention of the group is fixed on the recipient of its prayers. It sounds a bit like a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, where stories of transformation and rebirth are crafted and then cemented by the approbation of the community. Except in this case the power of the ritual is immeasurably enhanced by the altered state of consciousness all share.

For me, any inquiry into the peyote ceremony would feel incomplete without landing on some such explanation, though I can appreciate why Native Americans like Dawn Davis or Sandor Iron Rope might not buy it. Early in my research, I interviewed an attorney, a white man, who had played a key role in helping the Native American Church secure its right to use peyote. Jerry Patchen has attended more peyote ceremonies than he can count. In an email he recalled one that had left him perplexed about something that had happened during the night. So, in the morning, after the ceremony had concluded and everyone was milling around the tepee, he asked a young Navajo for an explanation.

“That is the problem with you whites. You always want to know everything. We just experience it.”

6. An Interlude: On Mescaline

It was around this time that fortune delivered to my door two fat capsules of mescaline sulfate. The gift culture is very much alive in the psychedelic community, I’ve found, and a friend who knew of my interest in mescaline had somehow procured a dose for me. He knew the chemist who had made it, allaying any worry that it was actually LSD or some other counterfeit, as can sometimes be the case with mescaline. Though I hadn’t yet tried San Pedro or peyote, I wondered how pure mescaline would compare. I wondered if my experience would rhyme with Aldous Huxley’s. I wondered all sorts of things, but no amount of advance wondering prepared me for what was in store.

The time and place I chose for my trip seemed ideal: a benign summer's day in a house built on stilts directly above a body of salt water. The bay, its moods and patterns shifting with the breezes and the tide, filled the windows of the house and lapped at the piers supporting it. I had only a single dose, so Judith agreed to sit for me. I swallowed the two capsules at 9:00 a.m. The onset of mescaline can be excruciatingly slow, so we spent the first hour walking along the shore, a pleasant enough interlude until I started to grow impatient. "Good mescaline comes on slow," Hunter Thompson wrote in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. "The first hour is all waiting, then about halfway through the second hour you start cursing the creep who burned you, because nothing is happening . . . and then ZANG!"

It was more gradual than that for me—there was no ZANG. When I first felt the mescaline come on, I was sitting outside on the deck reading while keeping an eye on two bright yellow heads slicing through the rippling water—a pair of strong swimmers. I had glanced up from my book when I suddenly felt a wave of revulsion, almost a nausea, for print. *Why would anyone ever want to read? Work to tease meaning from all these ugly black marks?* Suddenly the whole enterprise seemed absurd. No, what I wanted and needed to do now was not to read but to *look*—at the dark blue water, at the yellow heads carving lines through it, at the grain and the stains in the cedar boards cladding the house. It was incredible how much there was to see! The pelicans lumbering over the water before slowly climbing into the sky. The diamond reflections of sunlight glancing off the ripples in the bay. The crazy shade of chartreuse in Judith's socks. I was captivated by it all, and could not imagine ever wanting to do anything but devour with my eyes all that there was to see.

I tried, recalling Huxley, to invest a few minutes studying the creases in my pants, but they weren't the least bit interesting. (Maybe because I was wearing shorts?) Yet I did recognize the quality of total absorption in the material world that Huxley had described. Any desire to get up and move was gone; there was too much to examine right here. I wrote: "There is enough here. To see, to understand, to experience." And then: "A sufficiency of reality."

The word “sufficiency” appears in my notes several times that day and it holds a key, I think, to what was distinctive about the experience. To say mescaline immersed me in the present moment doesn’t quite do it. No, I was a helpless captive of the present moment, my mind having completely lost its ability to go where it normally goes, which is either back in time, following threads of memory and association to past moments, or forward, into the anxious country of anticipation. I was firmly planted on the frontier of the present and, though this would soon change, there was nowhere else I wanted to be, or anything else I needed from life in order to be content. Whatever was in my field of awareness—this sumptuous feast of reality!—was sufficient.

I wondered if perhaps I had found a hidden path out of the labyrinth of anxiety in which the virus and the fires had trapped us, that simply by lowering the horizon of my attention from the future—for the virus and the fires existed mostly there for us—I had recovered some of the beauty and pleasure in living that had been lost since the pandemic. There was a spaciousness to this present that felt like the perfect antidote to the shrunken-world claustrophobia of lockdown. Was this what it meant to become a king of infinite space?

I drank in the objects of my attention like a person who had suddenly developed an unquenchable thirst for reality. I couldn’t get enough of the herringbone pattern of the water as the tide turned; the dinghies and shorebirds diligently plying the bay; the fantastic multiplicity of greens forming the far shore, sandwiched between these two great slabs of blue, one sea, the other sky.

To an extent, this is what all psychedelics do—not so much change how we feel inside (as stimulants or depressants reliably do) as imbue the world around us with never-before-appreciated qualities. On psilocybin or LSD, the objects of our attention are liable to come to life and transform before our eyes: a garden plant, suddenly sentient, might return our gaze, or a chair might take on a personality and turn malevolent. Very often on psychedelics, objects become something much more than themselves. They

point, often to somewhere beyond the known world, to another plane of existence. And, sometimes, we can follow them there.

But this wasn't like that. These objects did not point. No, they were emphatically themselves—and more themselves than they had ever been. I made a cryptic note—"haiku consciousness!"—but, thinking back, I have a pretty good idea what I was trying to get at: everything in the world that day acquired this Zen-like quality of bare presence, a kind of immanence.

The poet Robert Hass has written about this aspect of haiku, which he traces to the fact that in Buddhist cosmology, there is no creator and therefore no higher plane of meaning to which nature refers. (Though Native Americans speak of the "Great Creator," nature to them is also complete in itself, embodying rather than signifying spirit.) By contrast, in the Christian conception of things nature is fallen; later, with romanticism, nature can offer redemption, serve as a means of transcendence. But either way, what nature does in our culture is point. It is encumbered by the meanings we put on it.

The poet who has done the most work scraping all that meaning, symbolism, and Judeo-Christian crust off the natural world is William Carlos Williams, who I decided that afternoon is the patron saint of mescaline. (In contrast, the patron saints of LSD, ayahuasca, or psilocybin are the visionary poets: Blake, Whitman, Ginsberg.) More than once, Williams managed in his poems to evoke on the page the bare actuality of things, never more effectively than with his wheelbarrow:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Rereading Williams in the aftermath of my day on mescaline, poetry that had always left me a little cold, I felt a shock of recognition. *These are the eyes I was seeing with!* Here was the sheer "is-ness" of the given world and its objects at a particular moment in time. Haiku consciousness.

And yet at the same time there is something here—both in the poem and in the world as it appeared on mescaline—that, for all its beauty, feels almost more than a mind can bear. Is it the poignancy or the transience or what? I'm not sure. But as the mescaline intensified, my initial delight in the is-ness and immanence of objects gave way to a shiver or shadow I couldn't quite account for—until a phrase, from another poet, popped into my head: "the immensity of existing things."*

It was this—the immensity of existing things—that began to overwhelm me during the next phase of the day, as peak intensity approached and things took a darker turn. I neglected to mention that Hamlet's claim to be king of infinite space was conditional: the very next line is "were it not that I have bad dreams." Here they came. Now it felt like this was more reality than I could handle. Wide open, my senses were admitting to awareness exponentially more of everything—more color, more outline, more texture, more light. It was, to quote from Huxley, "wonderful to the point, almost, of being terrifying." Indeed. I felt as though things could easily tip over into terror.

Huxley's trip had convinced him that the function of ordinary consciousness is to protect us from reality by a process of reduction or filtration—he spoke of consciousness as a "reducing valve," and the metaphor had never seemed more apt. Throwing open the doors of perception was wonderful, in the literal sense of the word, but without the usual filters of consciousness there came the fear "of being overwhelmed, of disintegrating under a pressure of reality greater than a mind, accustomed to living most of the time in a cozy world of symbols, could possibly bear."

This is where I now found myself, and for a moment, it felt like a kind of madness. My first-person subject was still present, but it lacked all volition, was too passive to defend itself from the assault of reality, of infinitude. So I closed my eyes, hoping to stanch the torrent of sensory data inundating my awareness. This provided a respite, but only briefly. Now I saw an intricate pattern of bodies entwined and dancing on a vertical scroll, reminiscent of Hindu miniatures in tantric or yoga poses. When I then tried to empty my mind by meditating, the "I" that was meditating wasn't recognizable as my own—it kept changing, one stranger after another taking turns meditating in my mind. The one I remember most clearly was a young Latin American woman in a white peasant dress who seemed to have some connection to the Indigenous mescaline users I'd been reading about and interviewing. Eventually, eyes closed proved even more overwhelming than eyes open; now, instead of the senses and outward reality, the inner floodgates of emotion opened wide, admitting cresting waves of sadness for people I had lost or fallen away from, and a boundless pathos for all the people, known to me or unknown, suffering now and before and in the times to come, more suffering than anyone could possibly hold in his head without it cracking open. It seemed possible the admission of so much suffering could kill a person.

I opened my eyes again, having decided I stood a better chance of withstanding the flood from the open valve of the senses than that of emotion, memory, and imagination. Never had my eyelids felt so crucial—powerful technologies for changing the channels of consciousness.

What was happening in my brain?! The notion that there is so much more out there (or in here) than our conscious minds allow us to perceive is consistent with the neuroscientific concept of predictive coding. According to this theory, our brain admits the minimum amount of information needed to confirm or correct its best guesses as to what is out there or, in the case of our unconscious feelings, in here. These top-down predictions of reality and prior beliefs are a bit like maps to sensory and psychological experience, and as long as they represent the actual territory well enough for us to navigate it successfully, there's no need to flood the system with lots of

unnecessary detail. Natural selection has shaped human consciousness not necessarily to scrupulously represent reality but to maximize our survival, admitting only the "measly trickle"—Huxley's phrase—of information needed for us to get by rather than the full spectrum of what there is to perceive and think.

Psychedelics seem to mess with this system in one of two ways: In some cases, the brain's predictions about reality go haywire, as when you see faces in the clouds or musical notes leap to life or something happens to convince you you're being followed. Common on LSD or psilocybin, this kind of magical thinking might occur when top-down predictions generated by the brain are no longer adequately constrained, or corrected, by bottom-up information arriving from the world via the senses.

But if Huxley's account and my experience are representative, then something very different happens in the brain on mescaline. Here, the bottom-up information of the senses and the emotions inundates our awareness, sweeping away the mind's predictions, maps, beliefs, and "cozy symbols"—all the tools we have for organizing the inner and outer worlds—in what feels like a tidal wave of awe.

The overwhelming peak of the experience didn't last long, fortunately, and eventually I found my footing, allowing me to navigate all the information coming in without capsizing. Mescaline goes on and on—it is, assuming you're enjoying it, the most generous of psychedelics—and I settled in for the twelve-hour ride. Now, having regained a measure of mind control, I could choose to go deep on whatever I looked at or thought about. Later that afternoon I got chatty, and enjoyed being close to Judith. Together we listened to music, and I could hear more in the notes and their arrangement than I ever knew was there. The late-afternoon sun was raking the house, which inspired thoughts about shadows and the way they offered commentary—ironic, humorous, sarcastic—on the objects that cast them—their putative masters. What about musical notes—could they cast shadows? I listened for them. (*Definitely!*) I studied the bay out the window and registered every minute shift in color or mood. My heart felt opened up

by the molecule, the windows of my senses, too: there was so very much here to savor, being in this place and moment by Judith's side.

At one point that afternoon I entertained a slightly macabre thought: How exactly would this place and moment in time feel if I was experiencing it in the knowledge my death was imminent? Weeks or even days away? All of it would feel infinitely precious and poignant. Every detail of the scene I would prize as a gift, to be tightly held in the embrace of the senses: the blush of the fragrant apricots in that blue bowl, the reflection of the clouds in the glass of the water at ebb tide, the plaintive cry of a gull reaching us from across the bay. How it would feel, I realized with a jolt, is exactly as it feels right now.

So why not feel like that always? Well, it would be exhausting, surely, to turn life into this sort of unending observance. Ordinary consciousness probably didn't evolve to foster this kind of perception, focused as it is on being—contemplation—at the expense of doing. But that, it seems to me, is the blessing of this molecule—of these remarkable cacti!—that it can somehow crack open the doors of perception and recall us to this truth, obvious but seldom registered: that this *is* exactly where we live, amid these precious gifts in the shadow of that oncoming moment.

I made a note so I wouldn't forget what I'd learned after the mescaline wore off: "Had mescaline shown me the door in the wall?" If so, then the door was—just as Sandor Iron Rope had tried to tell me!—more like a mirror, for everything I needed to learn was not on the other side of it but right here in front of me, and it had been right here all along.

7. Learning from San Pedro

The Indigenous people I had interviewed had no interest in mescaline the molecule or the sort of experience I had had on it; for them, the power was in the cactus, whether peyote or San Pedro, and specifically in the cactus as it manifested its power in ceremony.

I was more eager than ever to participate in a ceremony. Yet beyond the logistical problem of getting to Texas and spending a night in a crowded tepee during a pandemic, there was now the injunction of the Native Americans to consider: to respect the practice of peyotism, as a white person, meant leaving peyote alone. Flying to Peru was out of the question —the country had been hit particularly hard by the virus—and Don Victor's next trip to Berkeley was who knows when. But I had a lead on a "medicine carrier" who had trained with him. She now led Wachuma ceremonies (the term "San Pedro" never crosses her lips) in a place that could be reached without getting on a plane. We began to talk and then to meet, outdoors, in her garden and mine.

Taloma, as she asked me to call her, fell into medicine work in her thirties. At the time, her marriage had just fallen apart. "I was not in a good place. I was living in cheap motels, eating fast food, alone." One day, driving through Big Sur, Taloma spotted the sign for Esalen, the legendary retreat center where the human potential movement got its start. Curious, she pulled in but was turned away at the gate: only participants in workshops were being allowed on the property. She left with a copy of the catalog. During a stop at a town a few miles down the road, Taloma managed to lock herself out of her car. Waiting hours for the tow truck to arrive, the only thing she had to read was the Esalen catalog.

"It was full of all these woo-woo esoteric things," she recalls. Taloma was not exactly the Esalen type. She had never used pot, much less anything stronger, and considered herself too much the rationalist to believe in "souls or energies." Yet Esalen, with its organic food and hot baths, seemed like the perfect refuge. So Taloma signed up for a weeklong workshop—"Healing the Child Within." The experience set her on a journey of self-healing that, in time, led her to her calling: healing others with the help of what she calls "the master plant medicines."

Taloma wound up living and working (in the garden) at Esalen for several months; "this powerful, sacred, healing land" went to work on her. "It saved my life," she told me. While in Big Sur, she was introduced to the "red path": working with a Native elder named Little Bear, Taloma did a

series of vision quests in the Santa Lucia Mountains behind Big Sur, fasting alone in the wilderness for four days, then seven, and eventually even longer. She participated in sweat lodges.

On the day she left Big Sur, Taloma had a near-death experience: the Jeep she was riding in flipped over three times on Route 1 before nearly plummeting into the ocean. She remembers finding herself in a tunnel with a light in the distance, before returning to consciousness. She had broken her neck and required extensive surgery to regain mobility. It was during a painful, years-long convalescence that Taloma discovered the healing power of the psychoactive plants used in Indigenous ceremonies—ayahuasca, peyote, Wachuma, tobacco. She was on "the medicine path."

With her high cheekbones and long, straight hair parted in the middle, Taloma could be mistaken for Native American. In truth, she is mixed-race, primarily Japanese American, with a trace of Native American ancestry, according to family lore. But while Taloma often mentions that fact, she also takes pains to remind people "I'm not Native American. I didn't live that struggle, and wasn't brought up in that culture." Her reverence for Indigenous culture is such that wherever she finds herself, she will seek the blessings of local Native Americans before holding ceremonies on their land.

In the years since she first embarked on the medicine path, Taloma apprenticed herself to elders in two different lineages: the Sacred Fire of Itzachilatlan, a fairly new spiritual movement based in Mexico that seeks to reunite the Indigenous cultures of North and South America by combining their ceremonies and plant medicines; and the traditional Wachuma ceremony of Peru, which she learned from Don Victor and his teacher, Don Agustín. It was only after twenty years of apprenticeship that Taloma felt ready to conduct ceremonies and offer medicine herself.

Among all the plant teachers she's worked with, Wachuma occupies a special place. "Every plant has its own spirit," she told me. "I've connected to Wachuma because of its indomitable will to survive." It's true! Chop off a piece of Wachuma cactus, leave it anywhere—on the ground or on pavement, in the sun or darkness—and it will soon sprout a new cactus

from the amputated limb. As long as it doesn't freeze hard, the plant will grow anywhere: city or country, in the mountains or at sea level, indoors or out; is happy to be watered but will go months without a drop; will send up new growth from any cut or injury and, for a cactus, grows fast—easily a foot a year. Though it flowers spectacularly and can produce seed, its principal reproductive strategy would seem to depend on disaster: getting whacked by machetes or toppled by the wind. Whatever befalls this plant it takes in stride, just another opportunity to send up new life. Compared to poky and vulnerable peyote, Wachuma *is* indomitable.

"This is the kind of medicine I want to bring to people," Taloma says. "It knows the energy of the city, the planes overhead, the sirens in the street, the wi-fi and cellphone waves we can't escape. Wachuma knows what we're dealing with. It's also a gentle and heart-opening plant. I feel strongly that it's the right medicine for this moment."

Taloma hadn't conducted any Wachuma ceremonies since the pandemic, but she had one planned for late August, and I was excited when she invited Judith and me to participate. In deference to the virus, the overnight ceremony would take place outdoors, with proper social distancing; we would wear masks, and drink the medicine from paper cups instead of a shared ceremonial chalice. And everyone would have to take a test for the coronavirus a couple of days before the event.

The week before the ceremony, Judith and I purchased mail-order COVID-19 tests. We bought new sleeping bags in case the night was a cold one. In a long Zoom chat we "met" the dozen or so people in Taloma's *allyu*, or medicine circle, and shared our intentions for the ceremony. We would drink three cups of Wachuma over the course of the night. Two weeks before the ceremony, I joined Taloma and two of her helpers as they harvested long limbs of Wachuma from a large planting she cared for, using pruning saws to slice through the unexpectedly tender flesh. We made a date to cook a few days before the big night.

And then, on the Saturday night the week before the scheduled ceremony, an immense lightning storm swept across Northern California. A spidery tangle of bolts completely filled the western sky, startling millions

of people awake, all of them with the same terrifying thought: fire. In the space of an hour, more than a thousand strikes had hit the parched late-summer landscape, igniting hundreds of fires. Within days the smoke had dimmed the sun and yellowed the sky, and on Wednesday morning, Taloma sent around a long email calling off the ceremony.

"We are waking up to a new day," she wrote. "Spirit has spoken loudly with an incredible lightning storm that has set fires across the state. . . . Any who have the time, space, energy to send prayers out to all who are in fear and anxiety right now, for their physical safety, for the animals and land . . . right now . . . please do so."

And that was that. I know this is an embarrassingly small-minded way to think about natural disasters that had upended so many lives and, by now, incinerated thousands of homes and some four million acres of forest, but I couldn't help feeling that I'd been thwarted yet again. Though Taloma wrote that she hoped to reschedule soon, now that fire season was upon us, the ceremony might not be possible until the rains came, when holding it safely out of doors would be difficult if not impossible. I needed a Plan C. But what *was* Plan C?

8. Drunk at the Wheel

With the fires something changed. The accumulation of disasters was taking its toll, not only on my plans but, now, on me. Somehow, I had managed to keep my spirits up through the first six months of the pandemic. But now the invisible threat had been reinforced by a second threat you could see and feel: a fine ash was falling from the sky, dusting plant leaves and cars and entering our bodies. COVID had rendered the outdoors the safe place; now the fires were forcing us back indoors, to compulsively check websites that assessed the degree of peril it had become to breathe. Our world, already made small by the pandemic, now contracted still further.

A “red flag” warning went into effect. That meant we were to prepare a “go bag” in case of an order to evacuate, which could come at any time. So we filled a small suitcase with essential items, though what exactly qualified as truly essential changed every time we tried to decide the question.

When I embarked on this project several months ago, it was mostly curiosity that drove me. What could I learn by tracing mescaline’s story, and having an experience or two with it—about the cacti, about Indigenous religion, about the possibilities of consciousness? I hadn’t gone into this looking to be “healed,” whatever that meant. Yet for Taloma that was the whole point of working with Wachuma. What else is medicine for?

When Taloma first asked me to formulate a prayer in preparation for our ceremony, I came up with something that was more academic than therapeutic: *What could Wachuma teach me about my mind?* Taloma didn’t say so, but I could tell she was disappointed. I knew she thought (rightly) I lived too much in my head, so I revised the prayer to make it a tad more personal: I wished—okay, *prayed*—to be less in my head and more in my heart, to be more present to my emotions.

These words—indeed the whole contemporary vocabulary of healing—sit awkwardly on my tongue. But after the fires came, I lost some of the mental energies and momentum that had propelled me through the first months of the pandemic without the friction of despair I now began to feel. I started to wonder: Could Taloma possibly be right? Could this plant help us find a path through the serial catastrophes of this terrible year?

“Trauma” is a word in heavy rotation these days. Taloma talked endlessly about it, how trauma “settles in your body” and “blocks energy” and, if it’s not addressed or acknowledged, can fester, leading to physical illnesses such as cancer, as “dis-ease” turns into disease. An unrecognized trauma can also lead to addictions, it’s often claimed, as people seek to “self-medicate” with substances or compulsive behaviors. Healers talk about how plant medicines often “surface hidden trauma” so that they can be “worked through.” *How* often? I wondered. Wasn’t trauma by definition

an exceptional event? Now it seemed like everyone suffered from some trauma; they just didn't know it yet.

Here in the midst of the pandemic, the fires, and the darkening political season, I began to think that my skepticism might not be supportable. I had stumbled across a psychologist quoted in the newspaper explaining that trauma is not necessarily a discrete, dramatic event. What trauma is really about, she said, is the sense of helplessness we feel when we're assailed by unpredictable forces beyond our control. Is this not our reality now? And then, in an image that I can't shake, she said: "It's like we're in an endless car ride with a drunk at the wheel. No one knows when the pain will stop." Thousands of readers must have recognized themselves in that image, white-knuckled in the back seat of that careening car. I know I did.

Just when Taloma's email canceling the ceremony popped up in my in-box, I had been trying to write a new prayer, this one asking frankly for help.

9. Plan C

"Wachuma doesn't heal you by itself," Taloma said. "Its power is in its subtlety. Unlike ayahuasca, which will grab hold of you and take you on a journey whether you want to go or not, this medicine doesn't put anything inside of you. But if you invite it in, it helps to reveal what is already there, and in that way engages you in healing yourself. I have seen miracles."

We were sitting around a table in a garden, observing the proper social distance, while Taloma showed me how to cut up cactus to make a small batch of Wachuma tea. After the ceremony was canceled, I had asked her if she would teach me how to cook Wachuma, and she agreed to a tutorial.

Taloma began by taking a bundle of dried sage from a purse and lit it; she then smudged the plant, the knives, and then us with fragrant smoke. There were two ways to cook cactus, and Taloma showed me both. The first, more painstaking method calls for cutting the spiky plant into foot-

long lengths with a knife, and then systematically removing its defenses. First the spines, by cutting a tiny notch around each areole and then scooping them out, taking care to remove as little of the precious flesh as possible. Next you stand the piece of cactus on end and, using a long knife, carefully slice down the length of each rib, separating it from the woody white core, which is discarded.

After cutting the long triangular ribs into more manageable lengths, you remove the cuticle—the tough, semitransparent layer of skin that, along with the spines, protects the plant's watery flesh from its unforgiving environment. This was the painstaking part: gaining sufficient purchase on an edge of cuticle, either with a paring knife or a thumbnail, in order to slowly peel it off in strips. Shorn of its defenses, the cactus's flesh is surprisingly tender and moist, like a soft cucumber. It had the puckering bitterness of any plant alkaloid; think of oversteeped tea, but nastier.

As I sat across the table from Taloma on a benign summer afternoon, learning how to slice and dice cactus flesh, the work felt much as cooking in the company of others always does: pleasant, desultory, productive. The scene made me think of chefs prepping vegetables for a stock, and in a sense that's exactly what was happening. The work occupied the hands but didn't demand one's full attention, so we chatted—about the fires, other recipes, Don Victor. What the work didn't feel like was breaking the law. If I had any worries at all that afternoon, it was that I probably wasn't worried enough.

The second method Taloma showed me for cooking the cactus was both easier and more gratifying, though it works only with a fairly young plant that hasn't yet developed a woody core. After removing the spines from a foot-long length of cactus, you simply slice it through the center, as thinly as possible. This yields dozens of paper-thin six-pointed stars, their bright chartreuse coronas fading to snowy white at the center.

Taloma piled these stars in a tall spaghetti pot, filled it nearly to the brim with water, and put it on a burner. This is when the domestic cooking scene gave way to something more ceremonial. Taloma lit her sage and smudged the pot of cactus with its smoke. Then she bent over the pot,

looking down at its bright green stars bobbing in the clear water, said a prayer, and, in Spanish, began to sing.

Before Taloma left, she offered these instructions: bring the pot of cactus to a rolling boil and cook it for three days, more or less, being careful to add more water whenever the level in the pot dropped below a couple of inches. When the stars turn from white to translucent, it is ready. Cool, then filter the mash through a fine cloth, put the pot back on the stove, and reduce the liquid by half. Pour the tea into Mason jars and store in the refrigerator.

When I finally "met" Don Victor, Taloma's teacher, he was in Cuzco and I was in Berkeley. Zoom wasn't working so we were on WhatsApp, reducing each of us to a postage stamp on an iPhone screen. Taloma served as interpreter, a challenging task since Victor spoke in torrents, shuttling back and forth between a world we shared (life under pandemic) and one we most definitely did not. That realm had its own intricate cosmology, based on higher and lower frequencies of vibration, other dimensions of existence, past lives, and sacred places, all of which seemed to be located somewhere in Peru. Honestly, I was lost a lot of the time, and when I wasn't, I felt as if I had stumbled into a world dreamed by Gabriel García Márquez, one with its own beguiling set of alternative physical laws.

To start, I asked Don Victor what he calls himself—a healer, a shaman, a medicine man? "I'm not a shaman, that is not an Andean word. I'm not a healer because I don't heal anyone of anything." He called himself a *chakaruna*—a human bridge for people to walk across to get where they need to be. "But a name is just a name," and he suggested the time for names and categories—indeed, for rational thought of any kind—was past.

"In these times people don't need to reason or ask questions so much. That is not the best way to understand the cosmic mind and Mother-Father Earth, which has become so tired from bearing the heavy, dense weight of human thinking, especially in the last two thousand years." He regarded the

pandemic as a sign we had fallen away from Mother-Father Earth, that we had lost touch with "our brother and sister animals, plants, minerals, bacteria, and viruses.

"That is why this pause we call the coronavirus is so urgent. It is not a time to analyze or rationalize or to understand. It is a time to replenish and regenerate the absolute energy of the mind."

The man holding forth on my screen was not stern or professorial in the least, but rather jolly. At seventy-one, Don Victor has a genial round face that is remarkably unlined; he wore glasses attached to a cord that formed a vaguely comical loop on either side of his head, and on top of his head, a baseball cap. He was happy to speak "without limitation," which seemed to mean that he would take any question I asked wherever in the world (and some places more distant) he wished to go.

This usually entailed a lengthy excursion that took us far afield, though he always somehow wound his way back to something resembling an answer. When I asked him how he discovered his vocation, he began by warning me that "when we ask one question it automatically has nine answers, and when we want to know what is the answer that will help us, then nine more answers show up."

The story of how he found his vocation, for example, begins when Don Victor is five, living alone with his mother in the town of Ayaviri in southern Peru. Every morning at 4:00 a.m. he would slip out of the house and run nine kilometers over three mountains, through waterways and woods, to the tiny Aymara village of Tinajani, where he would arrive at sunrise. Tinajani sits in a dramatic canyon punctuated with intricate red rock formations called Tampu T'oqo that are pierced with caves that are considered sacred. Victor would spend the morning playing in these caves, which he described as "interdimensional portals that hold knowledge of the history of life." The Incans buried their dead in some of these caves, and young Victor would talk to them, not realizing they were spirits. There he met a teacher named Hatun Sonq'o ("Big Heart"), who I *think* but am not 100 percent sure was an actual person. Every day "for three hours he would teach me, and that allowed me to open up my memories of past lives and all

the things I can now talk about without limitation." That includes the knowledge that the universe is composed of cosmic vibrations, the lower frequencies associated with anger and violence and limitation, the higher ones with love and peace and gratitude.

What does any of this have to do with Wachuma? Don Victor was gradually winding his way back to an answer to my question: he works with Wachuma because the plant has the power to raise the frequency of our vibrations.

Risking a follow-up, I asked Don Victor what his mother thought about his predawn adventures. "Mother didn't know. Nobody knew. When I would arrive back in my village, filthy, with my clothes ripped, I would undress and jump in the village water cistern to get clean—I can still feel how cold the water was, since this was in the mountains at thirty-nine hundred meters! When I got out, dripping wet, the whole village could see me. My mother would be furious. She had a braided piece of llama leather with a little ball at the tip and she would hit me with it. But she never knew where I had been."

I asked him about the spirit of the cactus and how it heals people. "It keeps teaching me all the time. I'm certain that one life is not enough to learn everything this plant has to teach us." Don Victor said the plant itself is no more a healer than he is; rather, it is a teacher. We have three bodies, he explained, the physical, the mental, and the spiritual—what he calls "the trinity." (He called each of them a *pacha*—"a world.") "The plant allows all three bodies, little by little, to vibrate at a higher frequency until it is only light, pure light. That is what is meant by illumination." I was lost now, but maybe that was okay: "The plant allows you to disconnect from the mind. You can't figure it out mentally. You need to feel it in your physical body."

Don Victor had his own theory of trauma. "When any part of your body has been affected by destructive energies or trauma, the heart will close down to protect itself. A closed heart will not heal. It will not express its feelings. The mind becomes more active because the heart's not feeling anymore. The mind will go into the past or it will go into the future, which doesn't really exist, and it will get stuck in a chaos, between remembering

the past and trying to go into the nonexistent future. And it will lose the gift of life, which is to live and be present in the moment. That is why the word for a gift in Spanish is *presente*." Wachuma locates and unblocks the dense energies of trauma so that the mind might quiet and the heart might speak again, returning us to the gift that is the present moment.

Before our time was up, I asked Don Victor for his advice. I told him that I had learned all I could about the plant, how to grow it and how to prepare it, but because of the fires and the pandemic, it seemed unlikely that I could participate in a ceremony, and I was frustrated.

"Two suggestions for you," he began. "There is a way we could do a ceremony online. I would be able to feel your vibrations and specify the proper dosage. This would be my gift." He had apparently done Zoom ceremonies a couple of times with people in Europe. The idea seemed a little weird, and I could tell Taloma was skeptical. It is true that much more of life than we could ever have imagined has migrated to Zoom: classes, meetings, Passover Seders, therapy sessions, funerals, cocktail hours, and on and on. But a medicine ceremony? I wondered about the legal implications—how secure was Zoom?

I asked Don Victor what his second suggestion was.

"The other idea is that you connect profoundly with the spirit of the plant, talk to the plant, and listen to it with your heart. If you have a clear intention and prayer, the plant itself will teach you how much you need to drink and when."

"Solo?" I asked, surprised.

"Sí."

A few days after our session with Don Victor, Taloma, possibly alarmed by his heretical suggestions, proposed a way that we might organize a ceremony after all. We could find an indoor space—a big living room somewhere—and limit the group to six or seven people, so everyone could observe social distancing. We would all get tested a day or two in advance, and Taloma would rejigger certain ritual elements to minimize our risk:

separate cups to drink from, separate feathers for smudging, separate everything. And she would invite only scrupulously COVID-conscientious people. This seemed like a reasonable plan; Judith agreed. We scheduled the ceremony for a Saturday night.

The living room where we gathered was a room familiar to me, a place I'd spent time in. Which explains my astonishment when Judith and I arrived early on the appointed Saturday evening: the space had been utterly transformed, the furniture removed and replaced by a large altar crowded with strange and wondrous objects and filling the center of the room. At first glance the room looked like a peasant marketplace in Cuzco, the floor spread with woven cloths in colorful patterns and four large animal skins—a bear, a deer, a bison, and a buffalo. On closer inspection, however, every object had been carefully placed in one of four quadrants, each corresponding to one of the cardinal directions and one of the four elements.

Here's a partial list of the objects Taloma had set out on the altar: vials containing purple sand from Big Sur; gigantic seed pods from Peru; an intricately carved gourd; a bowl of spring water from Esalen; a snake skin; a wooden carving of four grandmothers circled around a lit candle; a marble etched with the seven continents floating in water; a talking stick made from the dried core of a Wachuma cactus; an enormous ear of multicolored corn; fossils; crystals; a dozen or so candles; a Wachuma flower in full bloom; eight stones in the shape of hearts; an abalone shell holding a packet of dried sage leaves; the feathers of a condor and a white owl; a collection of shells; the head of an eagle; and, somewhat incongruously, a photograph of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Taloma had invited each of us to bring an item to add to the altar. I brought a black faux-barbed-wire bracelet my dad wore in his last years, somewhat inexplicably—it was something Amnesty International sent to contributors.

Taloma wore a white top crossed by a Peruvian sash and a black hat festooned with still more spiritual tchotchkes. She was assisted by "Sam," a lanky thirtyish apprentice with curly black hair and the palest blue eyes. After we took our seats on the floor around the altar, Taloma launched into

a lengthy explanation of what was going to happen during the night—the three obligatory cups of Wachuma (plus an optional fourth), the water ceremony at dawn, the option of a tobacco ceremony during the night (more on that in a moment). She spelled out a few rules: no speaking to one another during ceremony; no leaving the circle before dawn except to use the bathroom; no food or water till dawn. Sam handed out buckets to use in case we "got well"—that is, got sick: people occasionally vomited, Taloma explained, but such purging should be regarded as a blessing. Taloma lit a wad of dried sage leaves and, walking slowly among us, wreathed the altar and then each of us in the fragrant smoke. She offered prayers for us and for our troubled country and world. She invoked the spirit of the cactus in teaching us how to heal ourselves and how, once healed, we could better help to heal others. "We are our own best healers," she said. The cactus sees into us, body, mind, and spirit, revealing what needs our attention. Like peyote, it has a penetrating gaze.

There must have been two hours of these preliminaries before Taloma called us up, one by one, for our first cup of Wachuma. When my turn came, Sam poured eight or so ounces into a cup and handed it to Taloma, who said a prayer over the liquid before passing it to me with two hands. I was to silently say my own prayer and then gulp the brown liquid down all at once. The tea was so bitter it sent a shudder up and down my body. Sam now gave me a squirt of Agua de Florida* to rub between my hands, then bring up to my face to inhale. He instructed me to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth while making a sound—a pattern of breathing we would be encouraged to repeat all through the night, producing a variety of strangely primal sounds in the dark that helped form the ceremony's otherworldly soundtrack. After we had all had our first cup, Taloma began to sing a song about a hummingbird, in a lovely, entrancing voice.

It would be a long, strange night of many elements and episodes. For me, the whole experience was at once more and less powerful than I anticipated. Less powerful because I found the medicine to be remarkably gentle—it never completely took hold of my mind the way the pure

mescaline had done, even after I had ingested four cups. There were no visions. What it did was loosen all the cords that anchored me to place and time, freeing me to drift along aimlessly on the currents of the evening. But these currents were set in motion less by my own thoughts and emotions than by what was happening in the room: the vibrations of Taloma's singing and Sam's reedy flute; the spooky beating of an owl's wing flapping around my head; the flicker of candlelight on the curved ceiling; and, especially, the shifting emotional register of the audible exhalations, which comprised our sole connection to one another in the dark. These utterances, which seemed to emanate from somewhere deep within us, were by turns plaintive, pained, haunted, reconciled. Together the effect of these sounds was transporting, fostering a mental state that helped me better understand the power of medicine ceremonies, how the chemistry and the shared ritual work together to create a liminal space open to new possibilities. Also, how within that space the group becomes a kind of living, breathing organism, something greater than the sum of the individuals present. I could see—feel—how the medicine softens the edges of self and world in a way that amplifies the power of the ritual by taking us out of ordinary time, and allowing us to suspend disbelief.

This was no small thing. For who were we but a bunch of gringos, most of us white Westerners doing their best to enact an ancient ceremony imported from the Andes. Were we guilty of cultural appropriation? You could say. But such thoughts are the sober disenchantments of daytime; for the duration of that enchanted night they were banished, completely, along with so much else of our current reality. Credit the Wachuma for helping to weave that spell, for making such a ceremony even plausible, but credit also Taloma, who performed her role with absolute conviction. She became for us the medicine carrier, the keeper of ancient wisdom, the *Wachumara*, her words channeling something far beyond the person I had gotten to know. Taloma was in her element, and she was impressive.

My own experience was not at all what I expected. Others had more powerful responses to the medicine, and theirs ended up coloring my own, taking me out of the first person and, strange as this must sound, into the

third for much of the night. In retrospect, beside myself was exactly where I needed to be, proposing one possible path out of the nutshell confines of this dismal year.

Soon after we drank our first cup, I began to hear Judith, across the room, crying softly. Taloma went over to work with her, and I could hear them whispering intently. Something had come up for Judith, something she had grappled with in a previous session with another medicine. I had an idea what it was. Her late father had appeared to her, a man she loved dearly but who for most of his life carried a heavy burden of disappointment and fear; he'd been orphaned as a teenager and struggled with his various demons until quite late in life, when he abruptly turned sweet and seemed to find contentment. (A few years before his death, Judith asked him how he could account for the change. He shrugged and told her, "I no longer had time for all that shit, so I let it go.") Judith identified closely with her father and, as she had come to understand, she felt an obligation to carry some of his pain. During the previous journey, she had traveled to the underworld and there met her father, who told her she no longer needed to carry his burden. He released her.

But it was a gift Judith hadn't been able to accept, and this is what I could hear her, barely, whispering about to Taloma. Her mother, still alive, wouldn't allow her to shed any of the weight she was carrying. Judith was herself reluctant to let it go: by now the weight of this inheritance was a part of who she was, integral to her identity and her role in the constellation of the family. What would remain if she managed to let it go? This was a fear she was too fearful to give up.

I could hear Taloma urging Judith to make a move, renounce her inheritance. "It's your choice. We make the world with our words. Say it. Say the words right now." But Judith, crying more loudly now, couldn't bring herself to say the words. This was painful to hear—or rather, *not* hear. I felt helpless, unable to offer any words or a touch of comfort. Judith must have been reading my mind, because I heard her whisper to me across the room: "I need to do this myself." Whatever effect the medicine had had on me to this point now disappeared.

Taloma offered Judith a tobacco ceremony, something I knew about, having endured one a few weeks prior, when I was getting to know Taloma. Sorry to introduce another plant medicine at this point in our story, but it is common in Indigenous ceremonies for healers to deploy more than one. I had been surprised to read that many shamans regard tobacco as the most powerful of all plant medicines, and it figures prominently in ceremonies in many traditions, including the Native American peyote meeting. Westerners today bring a lot of negative attitudes to tobacco, regarding the plant as irredeemably evil, but, as Taloma explained, that is only because white people had abused and exploited this sacred plant when they arrived in the Americas, transforming it from a sacred medicine into a lethal and addictive habit.

There are a few different ways tobacco is used in Indigenous ceremonies, but usually as a means of purging evil or destructive energies. In Taloma's version, the recipient stands before her and closes one nostril while she offers a brief prayer that ends with the words "body, mind, and spirit." On the word "spirit," you inhale deeply while Taloma, using a syringe, shoots tobacco juice deep into your sinus cavity. A wave of fire races across the top of your skull from front to back and then travels down your spine. It is a bracing sensation. Taloma encourages you to stomp your feet, shake out your arms, move your hips, vocalize with abandon, and let go of whatever emotions you are holding. After the firestorm subsides, your mind feels freshly scrubbed and, at least for a while, cleared and wonderfully calm.

It wasn't until after we had all drunk our third cup of Wachuma that Judith asked Taloma for the tobacco. Judith is ordinarily an extremely private person, so doing such a thing in a group took courage. I had a tip to offer, but felt constrained by Taloma's no-talking rule. I waited until she stepped out of the room to prepare the medicine and then stage-whispered to Judith: "Whatever you do, don't swallow!" I had let some of the tobacco juice slide down the back of my throat and spent an uncomfortable night feeling like I had swallowed the contents of an ashtray.

The tobacco ceremony was not easy to watch. Now that I was completely sober, my prayers turned to Judith, as did the thoughts of everyone in the room. She seemed completely unselfconscious; I wondered if our collective energies had buoyed her. We watched from our respective corners of the room as, on the word “spirit,” the medicine coursed through her body, seizing control of her arms and legs and vocal cords, all helpless before its force. Deep guttural animal sounds emerged from her throat while her body, seemingly possessed, launched into a kind of spastic dance. Sam sang a song about a condor, chorus after chorus, while Taloma moved in rhythm with Judith’s swaying, working her hands over her body (so much for social distancing) and ritualistically yanking out knots of bad juju from her belly, her neck, and the top of her head.

The whole ceremony lasted only a few minutes, and when the storm subsided, Judith seemed becalmed. She told me later she felt good, emptied out and cleansed. Something had shifted in her; whether it would last remained to be seen.

I felt as though we had witnessed a kind of faith healing, and it helped me understand the power of doing this sort of work in a group. For in addition to the medicine and the rituals, there were the pooled energies of other people, all of it trained on one person, one outcome. We had also witnessed how, three cups in, the Wachuma could relax one’s mental and physical defenses (Judith is someone who ordinarily can’t even tolerate a massage!), softening the grip of the rigid narratives we tell ourselves about who we are and have to be. With the help of the medicine, Judith had put something supposedly core and unshakable about herself up for grabs. Although there was no guarantee this would happen, a space had been created in which a new story might begin to take shape.

After all the drama, I was eager to return to my own reveries, so I asked for the discretionary fourth cup. When I came up to Taloma’s altar, she asked a few questions to assess my state of mind and agreed I should have more. She decided to strengthen this cup by adding a big spoonful of powdered Wachuma from Peru. This thickened the brew, making it even more difficult to swallow, but I was grateful for the speed with which it

returned me to my inward journey, sending me further and deeper than before.

I spent the rest of the night carried along on warm waters of thought and feeling, in the kind of agreeably drifty meditation that often follows the climax of a psychedelic experience, though the climax hadn't been mine. I visited with people in my life both alive and departed. Some knotty issues I had planned to work on no longer seemed knotted; they passed into my field of awareness and then passed out, not so much resolved as released. At one point I wondered why *I* wasn't having an emotional or spiritual crisis, whether my defenses were too strong for the medicine to breach or if there just wasn't as much going on in my unconscious as I liked to think.

Eventually I turned my attention to the exercises Taloma had suggested we work with—the "three levels of forgiveness" and the practice of gratitude, exercises Don Victor had also talked about. By asking forgiveness for the pain we have caused others, Taloma had told us, "we cut our cords to the discordant or destructive energies that connect us to others in the past." Next we offer forgiveness to those who have caused us to suffer. I summoned my father, Judith, my son, sisters, certain friends, and asked for and offered these words. As it is, the medicine attenuates the bonds of the past, making it easier to let go of regrets. And then we forgive ourselves.

What follows forgiveness is gratitude, which I now felt break over me in a warm wave of tears—gratitude for the gift of having these people in my life, for having this life and however many more years of it remained, and for having been introduced to a plant with the power to summon these tears and help me to see, even in this bleak, bleak season of loss, just how much I had to be grateful for. Despair no longer felt like an option.

(How saccharine these words must sound! I can only imagine. I'm afraid banality is an unavoidable hazard of working with psychedelics; they are profound teachers of the obvious. But sometimes those are exactly the lessons we need.)

I was still drifting on these warm currents of emotion when Taloma began to close the ceremony with a water prayer. We hadn't had a sip of water all night, and the prospect of drinking some now was sweet. But first

the ceremony. Taloma lit a fat roll of tobacco, blew some smoke over the pitcher of water, and offered a long, plaintive prayer of “gratitude for the sacred water” that moved in widening gyres from the purity of this life-giving water she had drawn from the springs at Esalen, to the fouling of the earth’s rivers and seas by humanity’s carelessness and greed, to the even larger desecrations of nature in our time, the corruption of our country, and the proximate specters of the virus and fires. The pandemic and the great pause it had forced upon the world was the opportunity, she fervently prayed, for humanity to awaken to what we had done to the earth and change the way we live upon it. She reminded us the lockdown had shown how quickly nature could heal herself if given the chance. “But the time is *now*,” she said, her voice cracking under the pressure of an urgency she seemed to be channeling from the depths of the earth itself. Could this be our last chance?

The water prayer took me by surprise. Without warning, Taloma had shocked us out of our nighttime reveries and back into the daylight of history, recalling us to the perils waiting outside the space and time we had had the privilege of sharing overnight. What had been a time out of time, a brief, blessed respite from the fires and the virus, was now over. What came next? Taloma spoke of the ripples in water and how far they could travel. She prayed for us to become ripples of healing, traveling out from this room to repair the world before it was too late. To feel the raw force of her words you would probably have to be there, to have had your heart opened up by this plant, but they were as gutting as they were beautiful.

As the first soft light of the new day crept into the room, we greedily drank the pure water and gave thanks for it.

The ceremony’s last act was the passing of the talking stick, an opportunity for each of us to share what had happened overnight, and to try to make some sense of it. I was struck by how strongly Judith’s experience had inflected everyone else’s, especially how it had brought the spirits of our parents into the space we shared; mothers loomed large in the accounts several of us offered. Our separate psyches hadn’t merged, by any means,

but they had overlapped, and how long had it been since anything like that had happened?

When Judith took the stick, she sheepishly apologized for “all the drama last night.” And then she pronounced the words she hadn’t been able to say before, that she was ready to put down her father’s burden. Yet she did it in the future tense. When Taloma pointed this out, reminding her that “the future doesn’t exist,” Judith repeated them, now in the present tense, and smiled.

Before everyone dispersed to return to their lives, we took a selfie of our group, squeezing together to fit in the frame as if in a dream in which the pandemic was over. In the picture all of us look ragged and exhausted yet buoyant, too, and connected to one another in a way that we hadn’t been a dozen or so hours before. It was as if we had gone down a river together on a raft, endured some sort of ordeal we couldn’t quite describe but sensed had left us changed, in ways that Taloma said might take days or weeks to recognize. “The spirit of the plant will remain in you for several days, maybe longer,” she told us. “Look for it.” After packing up her altar, returning the sacred objects to their woven bags and wooden boxes, Taloma handed Judith the Wachuma blossom, faded now but still gorgeous.

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